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Frida Nilsson

# THE APE STAR



Translated by Julia Marshall

Illustrations from the feature film *The Ape Star*



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## Gorilla

When I was nine, I was adopted by a gorilla. I didn't ask to be, but I was. It happened one day in September.

All of us children at Renfanan—the home for orphans—had been sent outside for cleaning day. The wind danced around us, chasing up leaves from the piles we'd raked. Gerd, the manager, had commanded us to take out all the sheets, hand towels, pillows and blankets to be aired and shaken. She padded around keeping an eye on everything and avoiding the clouds of dust.

“Make sure the dust settles, before you start shaking the next one!” she cried. “Otherwise, you'll get sore throats and that means trouble for me.”

Aaron and I each held one end of a sheet. “Careful!” I said. “You’re flapping too hard.”

Aaron flapped even harder. “I can’t help being so strong,” he said, flapping till his face turned red.

My ponytail bounced around my head. At Renfanan everyone with long hair had to have a ponytail. “Less attractive to lice,” said Gerd.

“Stop it!” I cried, tugging the sheet so hard Aaron lost his grip. He wiped his hand under his nose and sniffed up a glob of snot. With his freckly face he looked like a spotted sausage.

“Shake it yourself then,” he said, picking up a pillow from the ground. He started walloping it onto his knees as if he was trying to kill it.

“The faster you work, the sooner you’ll be finished!” said Gerd. She was wearing her pale green housecleaning coat and her hair tied back.

No one went faster. The sooner we finished, the sooner we’d have to start scrubbing the floors. Or cleaning the windows, peeling potatoes, washing the dishes or raking more leaves on the lawns. There





was no such thing as spare time. Gerd thought we had enough spare time at night, when we were asleep.

There was a reason for the cleaning frenzy. The orphanage was expecting a visitor. Someone was coming to pick out a child to adopt. Gerd was nervous, as she usually was on these days. She'd been running around like a giddy hen since early morning,

checking the house and the children. Dust balls had to be hunted down, holes in clothes mended and ears scrubbed thoroughly with soap and water.

“Thank goodness you’ve all had haircuts at least,” she mumbled, looking at us. Every child had a fresh haircut because the photographer had just been at Renfanan to take our pictures. He came every year. The week before he was due, Gerd took out the big kitchen scissors and cut our hair. When it was time for the photo we had to line up in front of the orphanage and smile as brightly as we could. It was usually fun, some sort of break from the neverending cleaning and scrubbing. It was almost a celebration because these photos had been taken since the beginning, ever since Renfanan was built.

On the wall in the hall were lots of black and white photos of everyone who’d ever lived at the orphanage. Gerd was in a lot of them. She’d been manager of Renfanan since she was young.

“Look at that,” she said now. “Here comes the mail.”

I glanced over to the bend in the road, where a

black car with a golden post horn on its hood had just appeared between the fir trees. Gerd rushed out to the gate, waving her arms like a conductor.

“Stop!” she shouted at the driver.

He rolled down the window.

“We are freshly raked here! Freshly raked gravel!” She reached out for the envelope he was about to put into the mailbox. “I’ll take that.”

The car disappeared. Gerd hummed as she ripped open the envelope. But as she read, the hum fastened in her throat.

“Inspection,” she muttered, and her anxious eyes swept over us all. Almost as if she was counting us. She didn’t need to count, I knew that. Not a day went by without Gerd reminding us that there were fifty-one of us at the orphanage. Renfanan was a home for fifty children, with not one more allowed.

“Ha ha,” Aaron hissed, raising his eyebrows. “Someone’s gonna be toast.”

I stopped shaking my sheet and wiped my forehead. It wasn’t especially hot outside, but you got sweaty,

standing and flapping your arms like that. “What?” I asked. “What do you mean by toast?”

He opened his eyes as wide as two fried eggs. “Don’t you know that Gerd gets rid of the ones she doesn’t want?”

“Gets rid of?” I whispered. My stomach lurched uncomfortably. “Has them killed?”

He nodded. “Maybe not right away,” he said. “But haven’t you heard what she did once to a kid she had trouble with?”

I shook my head. Aaron stepped closer. “I heard,” he hissed, glancing at Gerd, “that a long time ago there was a kid she couldn’t stand. One night she put the kid on the back of her bike and took off. Then she left the kid in an old shed, where nobody lived and there was nothing to eat. It was so little it couldn’t do anything. Then Gerd came home, and never went back. And the child died.”

I stared at him. He nodded and smiled, the whole way up to his ears.

“Ha,” I said. “You’re lying.”

Aaron shrugged. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not. But she won’t be able to drag me away because I’m too strong.” He slapped the pillow to the ground with a crack.

Gerd was still reading the letter. “Tuesday the second,” she mumbled. “The inspection group checks hygiene and routinely counts the children. Yours sincerely, Tord Fjordmark.”

She swallowed and chewed her bottom lip. Then she looked up and saw that a few of us were standing and staring at her. “Oh well,” she said pretending to be calm, “we’ll make sure everything’s clean by then. Including fingernails!” She gasped. “Jonna!”

I started when she said my name that way, hard and loud. It’s not usually a good sign. Gerd strode crossly over and stood with her sharp chin pointing at me. “Do you think that sheet will get any cleaner clutched in your grubby little paws, eh?”

I looked at my hands. I’d forgotten to wash them again. The sheet I was holding was really dirty.

Gerd snatched it from me. “No wonder it’s so

crowded here!” she ranted, waving the sheet. “No wonder! You can all stay here until you’re sixty, all of you! Then I might as well start an old people’s home instead!”

It didn’t occur to her that she’d be as dead as a pickled herring and buried in the ground by the time we kids were sixty. I shuddered anyway. It was a terrible thought, still being at Renfanan. Gerd wasn’t really so ghastly, but she wasn’t a real mother. It felt like all of us children were a nuisance to her. If someone got the flu or pneumonia, it put her in a bad mood because it was extra trouble. And if someone hurt their knee and it bled, her only worry was about stains on the carpets. A real mother would feel sorry for their child, but Gerd only felt sorry for herself. That was the difference.

She turned to me. “You’ve been here for nine years now! Haven’t you learned to wash your hands before you pick things up?”

I felt my cheeks flame. Some of the others giggled, as they always did when Gerd scolded me, which was

often. I could never remember to wash my hands.

It's not as if I wanted to be dirty. It just went out of my head, however much Gerd nagged. Maybe my brain just wasn't made to think about soap. Maybe it was made to think about other things, but it hardly ever had the chance; it had to keep defending itself against all the soap thoughts that Gerd forced on it.

Sometimes I even thought that all this washing was a little unnecessary. As far as I could tell, you could stand at the basin and scrub yourself for several years, but when you finally stopped you'd soon be dirty again.

But I never dared say that to Gerd. She always said it was "an irony of fate" that she had a grubby pig like me on her hands. Not that I knew what that meant, but I knew it wasn't good.

"Well?" she said now. "Are you too stupid to remember a simple thing like washing your hands?"

I looked away; I didn't want to answer.

Gerd put a hand to her ear. "What? Are you a bit stupider than all the others, Jonna?"

Now everyone was looking at us.

“No,” I whispered.

“Hello!” cried Gerd, as if she was deaf. “I can’t hear what you’re saying. Please answer loud and clear so everyone can hear. Are you stupid?”

“No!”

“Alright then. Go and wash your hands.”

She turned and raised her voice. “The rest of us will pack everything up. There’s no point standing here and flapping all day if you still rub dirt on everything!”

Some kids started gathering up sheets and pillows, ready to go inside.

Then we heard a low brmming through the fir trees. A car was on its way. All the children put their heads up, like hunting dogs catching a scent.

“Take it easy now,” cried Gerd, but no one listened. Every time a car came to the orphanage it was mobbed by children. Everyone shoved and elbowed each other to get to the front and show themselves, to try to get out of there. Oh, how we longed to leave. We longed



for a real home, a real mother, a lovely one with her hair in a bun and a waft of perfume. A mother who was sorry when you grazed your knee and hurried to put something on it, and a father with shiny shoes who rushed out and bought comics for you when you had the flu. Yes, we all wanted to get away from Renfanan, and since the chance of it was only one in fifty-one, no wonder we elbowed each other the few times the orphanage had visitors.

I ran with the others towards the gates. The car was coming closer; it would soon be here. I stood on tiptoes to see over all the new haircuts...

An old banged-up car appeared between the fir trees. It was hurtling along. In a few seconds it roared through the gates and onto the gravel path. It did a couple of wheelies around the big oak tree, then pointed its front right then left, as if it couldn't decide where to stop. Finally it hit the brakes, spun a half turn and halted in front of us.

Now it wasn't only Aaron's eyes that were like fried eggs. The car looked like it had escaped from the

scrapyard. The muffler dragged on the ground, the engine smelled burnt and the windows were covered in stickers. The body was rust-brown, with flecks of old green paint here and there.

I wrinkled my nose. Whoever was in this car wasn't someone I wanted to go home with. The others seemed to be thinking the same.

“What a heap,” cried Aaron. “I'd rather die than get into that.”

Gerd stood as if hypnotized, staring at her ruined gravel path. Then she looked at the car. The driver's door opened.

A large hairy leg swung out. There was a muddy boot on the end, with ragged laces. The second leg followed, just as thick and hairy. I gulped and gawked. Partly I wanted to stay and see who it was, and partly I wanted to run and hide. There was something weird about a car like that coming to Renfanan; it wasn't normal. The cars that came here were always fancy.

A hand gripped the car's door frame, and the driver uncoiled from the door with a moan and a groan.

I thought my heart had stopped for a few seconds. Everyone was dead silent.

It was a gorilla! She was incredibly tall, with a belly as round as a barrel and a bulky black head like an overgrown pear. She wasn't wearing a top but had on a pair of baggy trousers. They'd ridden up above her knees. The gorilla bent down and pulled the cuffs over the tops of her boots. She crossed her arms and looked up at the rows of dormitory windows on the top floor, over to the cellar where the potatoes and pickles were kept, back at the kitchen door you entered if you were coming in dirty from the garden, and finally, at the forest, which loomed behind everything like a dark, menacing wall. She stood a long while, taking it all in, then lowered her gaze and looked at us children speculatively.

Everyone turned and rushed for the orphanage door at high speed. Only Gerd stood and stared at the gorilla as if she'd seen a ghost. I followed the others. My heart was hammering in my chest, my boots clattering in the gravel. I wanted to get inside, fast!

But something strange happened. I stopped; I don't know why. I stood with my back to that ugly gorilla, and I remember thinking: I should go inside. I should go and hide like all the others.

But I couldn't. I sensed all over my back that someone was staring at me. It was so intense and compelling I had to look back. Even though I didn't want to, I slowly turned around.

Gorilla's brown eyes met mine. She smiled. She had enormous teeth that were crammed together in crooked rows. She took a step closer. I was fixed to the spot.

Then Gerd fainted. She fell with a little yelp into the hedge and lay there. Gorilla bent over her and fanned Gerd's face with her paws. Gerd soon woke up and got shakily to her feet like a nervous little finch. I ran off like a shot and disappeared through the door.

In the big light-filled hall everybody's shoes and boots were in a pile. I kicked off my boots and with my heart in my mouth I raced up the stairs. On the wall hung all the old black and white photos in neat

rows, but when I went into the dormitory, it was as chaotic as a hen coop. Kids were clambering all over the place, shrieking.

I sat on my bed, and the rusty springs squeaked. I had a terrible feeling in my stomach. Gorilla had looked at me so unnervingly. Gerd would never let her adopt anyone, never. That gorilla was too awful.

“Did you talk to it, Jonna?” Aaron called from his bed. He sat there with the two dark-haired boys who were brothers, who usually giggled at everything he said.

“Are you stupid?” I shrieked back at him.

“Not me,” he answered. “But you might’ve thought you’d suit each other.”

The brothers snorted and looked at him admiringly. They were cheeky little brats, even though they were only five and six.

“Shut up,” I muttered, and I lay down with my back to him.

Aaron came quickly over to my bed. “Where do you think it got that belly from then?” he whispered.

I turned over. “What do you mean, got?”

“Ha ha.” He twitched his red eyebrows and looked pleased. “I mean how do you think it got to be so fat?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “How did you get to be such an idiot?”

Aaron stopped smiling. He stuck out his chin and stared at me. “At least I’m not so stupid that I don’t understand why that gorilla came here.” He patted his own belly and nodded meaningfully. “That’s why it’s so fat. Children!”

“What?” I could hear that I sounded scared even though I tried not to be.

“It’s obvious,” said Aaron with a shrug. “Do you know how expensive it must be for such a fatty to buy meat at the shop?” He shook his head. “Adoption is a lot cheaper.”

I stared at him in horror. But then I shoved his shoulder. “Huh! Stop lying.”

Aaron sucked in a breath. “Careful, Jonna,” he whispered. “It’s here!”

“Shut up,” I said, but then I noticed that everybody

in the room had gone quiet, looking at the door. I turned around.

There she was, Gorilla, tugging up her baggy trousers. Gerd was also there, her face as red as a Christmas bauble, her eyes flashing lightning.

“Lucky for you and me that we’re skinny,” whispered Aaron. “It’ll probably choose somebody with a bit more meat on...”

“That’s enough!” Gerd interrupted. “Why were all the sheets left in a pig-heap down in the yard? And what’s been going on up here?”

Nobody answered. Gerd took a deep breath. “Line up!” she commanded.

Slowly and carefully, we moved around the room. Everyone spread themselves across the floor to form lines. I chose a place at the far end. I hitched up my shoulders and tried to look hunched and sour. No one wanted hunched, sour children.

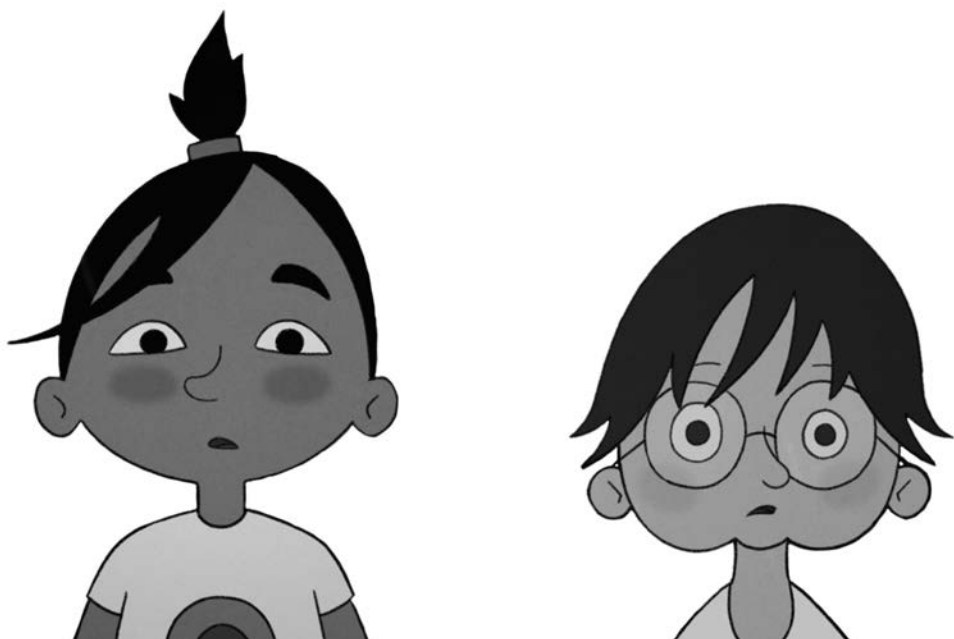
Gerd approached. “Now then!” she said. “I want to see some happy faces! And you will be polite when Gorill...when the lady here speaks to you.”

She turned nervously to Gorilla, who gave her a measured look, then turned to look at us. My knees shook. Part of the line backed up when Gorilla stepped forward. She was so big. Her face was wrinkled like an old sailor's, and her fur shone as if she'd rubbed it with oil.

“Stay in your lines!” snapped Gerd. “And be polite!”

She was very twitchy—maybe she thought she'd get adopted herself if none of the children was to Gorilla's taste.

Gorilla went up and down the line. When she reached me at the far corner, she stopped. I stared at





the floor, and I hunched my back until it felt as if it would break in the middle.

Gorilla stayed there. Time dragged on for an eternity, and no one made as much as a squeak.

“But Jonna!”

It was Gerd who finally dared to open her mouth. She gave Gorilla a fawning glance, before coming over to me. “Didn’t I tell you to wash those grubby paws? Is it swine week at Renfanan without me knowing, perhaps?”

Gorilla followed what was happening closely. Gerd noticed and was encouraged. “How do you think the lady here feels when she comes to visit and finds you so slovenly?” she hissed. “That can’t be nice!”

But Gorilla looked increasingly amused and Gerd, sure that she was gaining points, went on with her commentary. “No, and you know what? Next time we get a visitor, I’ll have to hang a sheet over you, the way you look. Heaven help me. What a ragamuffin!”

I didn’t know what to say. Tears burned under my eyelids and everyone stared at me, as usual.

Gerd sighed, hands on hips. “My sincere apologies, dear lady,” she said to Gorilla. “Between you and me, this child is downright hopeless, one of those we’ll never get rid of. She’s been here since she was just a scrap, left on the steps. In nine years, I haven’t managed to trick anyone into taking her.”

She leaned towards me. “Did you hear that?” she said. “Now you know why you’ll never leave. Because you insist on being dirty all the time!”

She looked at Gorilla with a smile that meant the two of them completely agreed that I was a stupid, stupid child.

Gorilla crossed her arms over her enormous stomach. Then she nodded at me.

“This one will suit me fine,” she said.



## The house in the old industrial part of town

Some children in the line gasped.

“Oh... well, well.” Gerd looked unsure if she should smile at Gorilla or me. “Well then. In that case you can come this way.”

I stayed where I was. There was roaring in my ears, and I thought I might throw up on the floor in front of everyone.

“So!” Gerd hissed, pulling me with her. I waited for a comment from the others, a wave of giggling or Aaron saying again that Gorilla and I suited one another. But no one said a thing. Everyone was quiet as mice, and Aaron’s face had turned completely white.

“There’s just the paperwork to take care of,” said Gerd on the way downstairs. “We’ll do that in the office.”

She meant my papers, which said who I was, what year I was born and things like that, and the paper Gorilla needed to sign so I would be hers. It was a nightmare. I wanted to turn around and run back to the dormitory, hang on to my bed and never let go. But I couldn’t: Gerd’s hand was clamped on my arm like a claw.

Gorilla nodded her heavy head. “Hrm,” she growled and stomped ahead. She went straight into the office, and Gerd pushed me after her.

Gorilla sat down in an armchair. She looked around, stopping when her eyes fell on an old black and white photo. It was Gerd in her younger days when she had just started as manager of Renfanan. The photo was more than thirty years old, but you could tell it was her. Gorilla looked at the picture and then at Gerd.

“Ha-ha-ha-haa,” Gerd twittered. “That was a very long time ago. A very, very . . .” She fumbled and

seemed stressed, as if she wanted to get this over with right away. She signed her name on a paper and handed it over. “All we need is the lady’s signature,” she said.

Gorilla’s fingers were so large, the pen almost disappeared into her hand. With an awkward grip she wrote in skewed letters:

**GORILLA**

Gerd looked at the signature sheepishly. “Yes,” she squeaked and swallowed. “That’s right. And you’ve signed for Jonna’s clothes, I understand. We’ll take twenty for them.”

I looked down at my dark blue jeans. They were short in the legs and worn out. Everything you got in the orphanage was a hand-me-down. I wore a white cardigan, and on a hook in the hall was a washed-out cack-yellow jacket. The boots that lay in the pile of shoes were so thin-soled it was like walking in bare socks.

Gerd rose from her chair. “There,” she said. “That’s all done.”

It was the fastest adoption ever to take place at Renfanan, at least as far as I could remember. I was glad the other kids were still out of sight when Gorilla took a firm grip on my hand and led me out through the front door. Gerd came behind.

“Wait!” she cackled. “Jonna’s things!” She did an about-face and disappeared inside.

The sun had crept down to the horizon. Gorilla’s large paw was hard and calloused. I could feel the need to cry creeping up from deep in my belly. I wished I could die on the spot, fall into a heap and never wake again. Jonna—who died of fear on the front step of Renfanan. At least then Gerd would feel sorry.

But I didn’t die. I stood there in the evening sun with my hand in Gorilla’s. The car was waiting on the gravel driveway. What a trash heap. It was probably life-threatening to ride in, too.

Gorilla had noticed me looking at the car. “Hrm,” she grumbled, pulling up the corners of her mouth. “I can teach you to drive if you want.”

I stared at her. For a long time, I didn't know what on earth to say. "Actually...I'm only nine," I managed at last.

Gorilla's smile disappeared. She looked at me from top to toe. "Of course," she muttered. "I suppose you can't reach the pedals. Never mind."

Gerd arrived, puffing. "There wasn't much," she said, handing over a plastic bag with my toothbrush and a porcelain gnome that was missing an arm. Gerd gave me a sullen stare. I knew why. She didn't like me taking the gnome. She'd thrown him away on Saint Knut's Day because he was broken, but I'd rescued and kept him. That was Gerd in a nutshell. She was so stingy, it hurt her if someone stole her throwaways.

The backseat in Gorilla's car was full of empty bottles, wrappers, apple cores and other debris. I sat in the front and Gorilla squeezed into the driver's seat. It squeaked horribly under her enormous weight, while her huge head almost buckled the ceiling.

"Right. Let's hightail for home," she said and started the car.

In no time we'd left the countryside behind and were on our way into town. Gorilla had hung ornaments and tinsel on the rearview mirror. The engine made a terrible rumble, as if it was meant for a tractor or something.

Gorilla drove very badly. She constantly swung onto the wrong side of the road. Oncoming cars had to drive up onto the pavement to avoid hitting us. Pedestrians shrieked and leaped aside, and if they didn't see her in time, Gorilla hit the horn. It played a complete melody, Toot-toot-toot, tootteli-tootteli tooot! Really loudly! I had to cover my ears to avoid being deafened.

We approached traffic lights.

"It's red!" I yelled.

"Uh, I'm on a roll!" roared Gorilla, putting her foot down.

In the rearview mirror I saw a truck crash into a flowerbed after it swerved out of our way. Gorilla kept driving.

If she stops to fill up, I'll jump out, I thought. Then



I can hitch a ride to Siberia, or Greenland, or the moon. Anywhere must be better than living with this person. Even Renfanan.

But Gorilla didn't need fuel. We had soon swished right through town and entered a small industrial area. Big, lonely buildings edged the road. There were workshops, garages, storage units and factories. Everything looked empty and abandoned. CLOSED was painted in big letters on an old gas station. Everywhere the yards were scrappy and sad, the asphalt cracked and patchy.

Here and there were signs on sticks stuck into the ground. In fact, there was actually a sign in front of every house we passed. They were toxic yellow and round, with something written on them in red letters. I squinted, but Gorilla drove too fast for me to read them.

She swung onto a smaller, unpaved road, which was kind of lonely. Tired lilac bushes hung down into the ditches.

“This is us,” said Gorilla, stopping the car.



I stepped out onto mud. We'd parked in front of an old, dark-brick factory building. The roof was sort of spiky, like a row of sharp teeth. A high, round chimney reached up to the grey sky. Along the front wall was a row of narrow windows. Most were broken and some were covered with planks. Beneath the windows was a large metal door. It had a heavy, rusty



handle which squeaked when Gorilla pushed it down. She let me go in first.

“Hrm,” she said, thrusting out her jaw in an absurd smile. “We’re here.”

Inside the door I put my foot on a packet of butter. “Oops,” said Gorilla, bending down. “That wasn’t such a good place for it.” She moved the packet a

smidgen to the right, kicked off her boots and went in.

Gorilla's home was one big room. On the floor was an enormous Persian rug. In one corner was a sunken bed on four spindly legs. Beside it were several bookshelves, all filled to bursting with books, and under the bed were piles of even more books. Next to the shelves was a puffy leather armchair and also a back door.

The kitchen was at the other end of the room. It had an old woodstove with a chimney that went straight up into the ceiling and disappeared. The stove top was covered with unwashed saucepans, casseroles, spoons, oven dishes, frying pans and a couple of flowerpots with pink geraniums in them.

On the kitchen table was a car door with the window wound down. Next to the table was a large, once-red wooden stool, and a smaller stool, freshly painted in grass green. On the counter was a TV with a broken screen and a vacuum cleaner with no wheels. Its hose hung on a kitchen cupboard.

This is crazy, I thought. Adopted by an ape with the world's worst sense of order. If Gerd saw this mess she would choke.

Gorilla cleared her throat. "Hrm. I thought you could unpack here," she said and went around the chimney. A hammock had been set up behind it, hanging under one of the windows. Gorilla rummaged in a cardboard box on the floor. She picked out a blanket with gingerbread hearts and gave it to me.

"I thought a hammock would be nice." She smiled as if a hammock was the most luxurious thing in the world. "It doesn't squeak. I've taken the springs out of my own bed because I can't stand it squeaking."

For a little while it was embarrassingly quiet and Gorilla began to shuffle nervously. "Will you...will you unpack, then?" she asked.

"Can you leave me alone?" I asked. "I want to unpack on my own, without anyone standing around."

She gave a start. She looked around, lost, and scratched her chin. "I'll go to the toilet then," she said, and disappeared out through the back door.



She didn't come back for a long time. I'd already crept up into the hammock and, when she padded in, I shut my eyes and pretended to be asleep. I could feel her breath on my hair. Then she crept over to the armchair. I lay listening to her turning the pages of a book. A cookbook perhaps, I thought, and felt my heart lurch. A hundred delicious recipes for orphans. I could see Aaron in front of me, the way he'd grinned in satisfaction and patted his stomach.

Why not, I thought. People like her can be sick in the head or anything. In a place like this, no one

would notice if one child, or a dozen, disappeared. She might have a whole pantry full of skeletons.

I couldn't fall asleep when I began to think like that. The more I imagined, the more certain I was that she was just sitting over in her armchair waiting to be convinced that I was asleep. Then she'd go and turn on the oven.

Above me, the teeth-shaped roof was full of windowpanes. I lay blinking at all the stars, but as soon as I heard the armchair creak, my stomach knotted again. Now she's getting up, I thought. If I hear her come this way, I'll run.

But time passed, and Gorilla didn't get out of the chair. She sat there for hours, turning pages. In the end I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, and I fell asleep.



## The broken window

When I woke the next morning, I lay motionless in the hammock. Out in the kitchen were sounds of frying. Steak frying. I felt blood rush in my body. This is it, I thought. She's about to club me to death and eat me up.

I carefully lifted my head. I couldn't see Gorilla, but she was clattering pans. Slowly, slowly I stretched my foot to the floor and stepped out of the hammock. My gnome stood on the bedside table and my toothbrush was in the drawer. I slipped them into the plastic bag, and waited a moment, listening. The clattering went on.

Then I tiptoed over to my boots, which were just



inside the door. My heart beat like a drum. I pulled on my boots and put my hand on the cold door handle.

It was locked. At that moment, Gorilla shouted behind me: “Oh, there you are! Goodness me, what an early bird! But the toilet is out in the yard, see?”

I turned around. I was so scared that my breath stuck in my throat.

Gorilla stood with her paws at her sides and a grin that went from ear to ear. “I’ll have breakfast ready when you come in again.”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t have to. I’ll go later.”

“Okay then,” she rumbled. “We’ll have breakfast now.”

Breakfast consisted of fried egg sandwiches and flat fruit soda. When we’d finished eating, Gorilla let out a half-suppressed burp, which made the dishes around us rattle.

“Oy, eggs make you full,” she mumbled and looked at the table, shamefaced. “Never mind!” She stood up so the chair overturned. “We can’t sit here nattering. Work calls!”

She put on a houndstooth cap and swung open the door to the backyard.

“Are you coming?” she asked, squeezing out one of her grotesque smiles.

I thought for a moment. This was the time to be smart.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m coming. I’ll just have a wash and tie up my hair.”

Gorilla did a large, enthusiastic thumbs-up and went out. When the door had swung shut, I ran over to the pantry and opened it.

There were no skeletons in there, or none I could see anyway. There was only the usual paraphernalia you find in a pantry, plus a lot that was unusual. A radio apparatus, boat propellers, a bunch of broken skis and a watering can.

If you have skis in the pantry, you’re probably sick in the head, I thought and closed the door again.

I looked around. I had to investigate what Aaron had talked about. In case it really was true that she ate children. But where on earth would I look?

A scrabbling noise came from the yard. I went over to the back door and opened it a crack.

A whole lot of strange things were out in the mud. Just then, Gorilla threw a long water hose that ran from the house, and then she went down on her knees by a large round tub full of water. I stretched my neck. What was she doing?

My blood turned to ice when I understood. The tub she'd filled was the biggest pot I'd ever seen. It stood on four legs, with a firebox underneath and a chimney on top. Gorilla put kindling and paper in the firebox and lit a match. Soon a little fire was crackling.

I flung myself away from the door, my head thumping in fear. It was a case of run or die. I rushed over to the big metal door at the front. I tugged and pulled at the handle, but it wouldn't open.

My breath was thick in my throat. Sweat crept and tickled over my body, and tears were on the way. I could see Gorilla pushing me down into the boiling water, however much I kicked and screamed. I could

see the soup she'd be feasting on in an hour or two, how she'd gnaw the meat from a little knotty bone and wish she'd chosen a kid from Renfanan who wasn't so skinny. No, it couldn't happen! She'd never eat me! How could I escape, though?

I looked up at the windows that ran above the door. One of those broken panes would be easy enough to squeeze through if I could only reach it.

I glanced around the room. The kitchen chairs were too low...

The armchair! If I stood on its back, I could reach. I set off across the room and squeezed in behind it. Then I braced myself against the wall and pushed.

It might as well have been nailed to the floor or made of concrete. "Move!" I commanded. "Please, please move!"

"Jonna?" Gorilla called from the yard. "Come out here, I have something to show you!"

At last, the armchair started to slide. My heart pushed it forward, pushed it with strong beats, until there it was, under the window.

“Jonna?” Gorilla sounded curious now. “How are you doing?”

I jumped onto the chair and climbed onto its back. Just as I put my hands on the windowsill, the back door squeaked.

“Oh, no, no!” whimpered Gorilla, throwing herself across the room.

I scrambled halfway out of the window but her huge paws gripped my ankles. She pulled me back.

“No!” I cried and tears rushed down my cheeks. “No, you can’t do it!”

Gorilla ducked my kicking feet. “Ouch!” she muttered. “Calm down now-ow!”

“Let me go!” I shrieked. “Put me down! Let—”

She put me down. I caught my breath sitting in the armchair.

Gorilla crossed her arms. “You can’t take off on your own, don’t you know?” she said sternly. “Because I’ve signed a piece of paper that says you’re my responsibility now. If you run away, I don’t know what would happen. You must understand that.”

“Don’t eat me,” I said, and I hid my face in my hands.

“Eat... what?” Gorilla said.

I waited a moment or two. “Aaron at Renfanan said you eat children.” I looked at her through my fingers.

The moment I said it, I heard how stupid it sounded.

“Well, I don’t know,” I mumbled, looking down. “That’s what he said anyway.”

Gorilla’s forehead was pleated like an accordion.

“Hm!” she said after a long pause. “I won’t ever eat you, you can be sure of that. The way you wriggle and carry on, I wouldn’t have a moment’s peace with you in my stomach. Would you like a wash now, or have you changed your mind?”

“What?” I said.

She pointed to the backyard. “I’ve heated bathwater for you in the wash tub. But I can let it out.”

And with those words she went off and fetched an old chopping board, nails and a hammer. She stood and hammered the board over the broken window.



When she was done, she went to the back door without looking at me.

But before she stepped out, she stopped and turned around. Her black mouth was pursed, and her eyes looked small.

“It’s not so bad here,” she said. “Not as bad as you might think.” She dropped her gaze. “It suits me in any case.” Then she left.

I stayed in the big armchair, feeling absurd. The words rang in my ears: Don’t eat me! What an

idiotic thing to say. Although, what would anyone think, seeing her set up that enormous pot and everything?

But really, it was Aaron's fault. He'd get it for telling me lies if I ever met him again.





## Crescent

The next day Gorilla wanted me to keep her company while she worked. “Because if you try to run away again, it’s my responsibility,” she said. “Out in the yard, I can keep an eye on you.” She opened the back door and waited sternly for me to follow. I pulled on my yellow jacket and stepped out into the mud.

The backyard was bounded by a high plank fence with big gates made of steel mesh at one end. There was a rickety outdoor toilet with red walls. Lying around on the ground were office chairs, basins, road signs, rolls of barbed wire, a fridge, two dishwashers, boxes with cords and hoses, wardrobes, car parts, bike handlebars, a broken kick scooter,

half a moped, bed frames, broken stepladders, bookshelves...everything!

Gorilla bent down and stood the fridge up. Then she wiped it with her arm and pulled a plastic bag out of her pocket. She took out a little sticker and a felt pen. She put the sticker on the fridge and wrote **40** in wobbly writing. Then she turned to me.

“There,” she said. “This is the company. What we do. Scrap.”

I wasn't surprised.

Gorilla's backyard was the town's dumping ground for scrap and bulky trash. Every day people came and left their scrap in order to get rid of it, and every day other people came and bought the scrap, because they needed it for some reason. All Gorilla had to do was to decide what she wanted to be paid for things and then put the spoils in her cashbox, which was actually a shoebox.

“Not a million-dollar company,” she said. “But we don't have to chew on our knuckles to survive.”

I wondered if I should write a message to the

orphanage. A postcard or something. *Dear all at Renfanan. I live with an ape in a scrap heap. Hope you are as lucky as me one day. Love and hugs, Jonna.*

The same morning Gorilla taught me how to price the goods.

“If something is broken it has to be cheap,” she said, holding up a frayed fishing rod. The handle you wind the line with was bent and sitting at an angle. She tested it, winding it back and forth. “But it still works,” she said. “Five.” She held out the rod. I put a sticker on it and wrote 5.

It didn’t look very professional.

“Good,” said Gorilla. “It’s cheap. Someone will grab that straight off and think they’ve got a bargain. But when they go to pay, you look at the price tag, and then you look crestfallen. Oh, my goodness, you say. I’m so sorry, there’s been a mistake. I can’t let it go for less than ten, as you well understand.” She held out her arms. “Then they cough up ten, because they’ve been so pleased with their bargain, they don’t want to give it up. That’s how you do business, got it?”

She went over to a corner of the yard and held up a little red bike in her fists.

“Hmm...” she said, giving the front wheel a spin. “This is like new.”

Not especially new, I thought. The bike was rusty, and the headlamp was crooked. It was a Crescent.

Gorilla scratched her chin. Then she looked at me. “Do you like it?” she asked.

“What?” I said. “No.”

She scraped some rusty flakes off the frame. “Can you ride a bike?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Because I’m not interested.”

I couldn’t help looking sideways at it. At Renfanan, Gerd was the only one with a bicycle. We never got to try it, because she said the value of the bike would fall if it got worn out.

Gorilla set down the little red Crescent in the mud. “It’s yours,” she said. “So you can learn. It’s the right size for you.”

All of a sudden, my legs seemed to get lighter. I could have shot right up into the air, and I noticed

that the corners of my mouth were going up in a smile.

Then I saw Gorilla's satisfied face.

"No," I said. I put a sticker on the handlebars. "What shall I write?"

Gorilla's smile disappeared. "Hmph," she muttered. "Write twenty then, and it'll be sold in no time."

"Good," I said.

"Good," she said.

Now and then during the day someone looked into the yard to buy scrap. Gorilla played the wrongly marked sticker scene every time. A man in carpenter's trousers wanted to buy the fridge.

Gorilla slapped her forehead. "It's a shame about the terrible handwriting," she complained. "But of course I'm hindered by my physique." She held up her large black hands. "Everything looks like crow's feet when I write with these paws, as the gentleman will understand. Unfortunately it says sixty on the price tag."

The man became doubtful and said that sixty was probably a bit expensive. But after a moment's

consideration, he bought the fridge in any case because he had sort of started to like it.

And so it went on. A floor lamp, marked at seven, sold for twenty. A bike pump went for five, instead of three as written on the price tag. Half a typewriter was sold for a twenty, exactly as was marked. The other half, however, went up to forty, although in the beginning it appeared to be included in the purchase of the first half.

In the afternoon I stood sorting screwdrivers. Then a woman arrived in checked trousers and pointy birdwing glasses. Her eyes went straight to the little red bicycle.

“How much is this?” she asked, eager to buy.

I bit my lip. I had said that I didn’t want it, but still. It felt as if the woman was trying to get her hands on something that was a tiny, tiny bit mine. Gorilla looked at me and then at the bicycle, as if waiting for me to say something. But if I did, she’d feel so smug she’d burst. I pretended not to see her.

Then Gorilla squinted at the price tag, where I

had written twenty. “Yeah,” she said. “Thirty seems to be what it says.”

“Good,” said the woman and took out her purse. “Done.”

“No!” I said.

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Excuse me?” she said tartly. Gorilla crossed her arms and looked at me, and soon the woman pulled out two notes. “Can we hurry things up a little? The bike is for my grandchild. I’m paying you in cash.”

A little squeak escaped from my stomach. Gorilla looked at me. And slowly her eyes grew smaller. The black forehead creased, and the jaw jutted angrily. “Ha, I know what you’re squeaking about!” she grumbled. She thumped her fist in the palm of her hand and let out a roar. “Ahhhh! It makes me furious!”

At once, the woman looked scared; she swallowed and backed off a couple of steps. Gorilla towered over me. Her sharp teeth glinted in her mouth. “You’ve mucked up the price tags again, haven’t you?” she bellowed.



I froze in terror. “No—” I began.

But Gorilla gave me a secretive wink. “Shh!” she whispered. Then she went on in a furious tone: “Don’t try to deny it! You’ve made a mistake!”

She turned to the woman who was staring back in terror. “I beg pardon,” she snorted, rolling her eyes so she looked completely insane. “This child can’t do a thing right. It’s not the first time she’s put on the wrong price, I can tell you.”





At last, I understood what Gorilla was up to. “Exactly,” I said. “It should say eighty, not thirty.”

“That’s right!” Gorilla bawled, like a monster. “Eighty!!!”

The woman hurried to take out some cash. With a shaking hand she held out the money to Gorilla, who was waving her fists as if possessed. “Here!” she squeaked. “Eighty!”

Gorilla was taken aback. “No,” she snorted. “No,

you stupid child. I said eight hundred, not eighty!” She sniffed and muttered a little more quietly, but not more pleasantly: “You’ll be lucky not to end up sleeping in the outside toilet tonight, if you keep making these sorts of mistakes.”

“Yes,” I said, forcing myself not to smile. “Sorry.” I gestured at the woman. “Run,” I whispered. “Run for your life! I’ll be fine.”

The woman nodded. She threw a terrified look at me and Gorilla and headed for the gates.

Gorilla grinned when I rolled the bike into the house. Not that I’m going to ride it, I thought. But just so she doesn’t sell something that’s mine.



## No panic on the Titanic

There was flowery wallpaper in Gorilla's toilet. Peonies. She had done the wallpapering herself, a bit roughly, so there were gaps between pieces. There were paintings on the walls too. Mostly prints of old royals, but one picture was of a sinking ship. *No panic on the Titanic*, was written at the bottom of the frame. In the bow that was pointing up at the sky stood some poor guy holding a rope. Soon he would drown.

One morning I sat among the peonies, looking at the picture of the *Titanic*. Gorilla was out in the yard, rinsing out an old wheelbarrow with the hose. She mumbled and hummed. She often hummed to

herself. It sounded terrible, and yet there was still something pleasant about it.

I dangled my legs. I might as well sit here as go out and watch Gorilla and her old wheelbarrow.

I started to think about the bicycle that was in the house. Then I shook away the thought. The bike was fine where it was.

A car droned up and stopped outside the gates. I heard Gorilla mutter something and stamp away to turn off the tap. The car door opened and slammed shut. Footsteps came smacking through the mud.

“A-hem!” Gorilla cleared her throat formally. “There’s parking at the front of the house!”

When the footsteps had come very close, they stopped. “Is that right?” answered a man’s voice. “I thought you had a mud field at the front and parking around here at the back.”

Gorilla snorted.

The man took a little stroll around the yard. “The roof is clearly about to cave in,” he said. “Watch it doesn’t fall on your head. Costs a fortune to fix.”

“Ah,” grunted Gorilla. “I was just rinsing out the wheelbarrow. What do you want?”

“Well, what do you think?” said the man. “That I came here to muddy my shoes?”

“Hmph!” Gorilla was sounding angry. “If you’ve come with your usual nagging, you can turn right around and leave! I’ve said all I have to say!”

“Hey, hey, hey,” said the man condescendingly, as if Gorilla was a small child unable to control herself.

I slid from the toilet seat as quietly as I could. I didn’t want to go out before the man had disappeared. There was something nasty about him. I sensed that his quiet manner was a sham.

The footsteps quietened. “We’ve decided to be kind,” said the man. “You get twice as much as your dung heap is worth. Double. We haven’t been this generous to anyone else.”

“Ha!” Gorilla was scornful. “Your idea of what this land is worth is plucked from the air. I don’t want to know what you gave the others, hardly enough to pay the moving van.”

“Don’t worry about other people’s business,” said the man. “Think about your own, now that you have such a fine offer.”

“My business is in scrap!” said Gorilla decisively. “You won’t trick me out of this land, I’ve told you a billion times! Brush off now because I have a wheelbarrow to clean! I’m closing for the day!”

There was silence.

“Okay,” said the man after a long time, and he no longer sounded calm, but furious. He hissed, “But one day you’ll close for good.”

“Pah!” spat Gorilla. “Threats can’t hurt me.”

“Nah-nah,” said the man.

The footsteps smacked back towards the gates. Suddenly I wanted to see what the man looked like before he disappeared. I raised the door catch carefully. But my hands had become so shaky and sweaty from everything that I lost my grip. The catch rattled.

The footsteps stopped. “Is there someone in there?” the man wondered.

Gorilla lingered too long before answering. “No,” she said shortly.

The footsteps turned and began to slap back.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Gorilla, flustered. “It was the toilet door banging in the wind. I must put a firmer catch on it. Weren’t you leaving?”

I was about to drop the catch when the door opened.

I looked up into a long face with sagging cheeks. The eyebrows were broad and sharp, and the eyes were small. The nose was prominent. He was wearing a business shirt and tie. He looked at me for a long time. He didn’t seem especially surprised. More thoughtful. After a while he pulled his mouth into a smile. His teeth were long and yellow.

“Hello,” he said in a smooth voice. “Who are you?”

I swallowed; I couldn’t say anything.

Gorilla came at a run. “You leave her alone!” she said. “She has nothing to do with this!” She forced herself between me and the man. “Go! Get out of here!”

The man backed away, but he didn’t stop looking

at me. Those small cloudy eyes made me nervous. Why wouldn't he stop smiling?

Gorilla shoved him away with her big stomach, and in the end, he gave way. "Okay, okay!" he hissed. "I'm going!"

"You'd better," said Gorilla. "And don't come back unless you're buying scrap, because the answer is no."





The man turned on his heel and stepped over to his car. It looked expensive. On one window was a round, toxic-yellow sticker. He smiled at me one last time, before sliding in and driving away. Mud sprayed from the wheels.

Gorilla had already started picking through a box of wood planers. She was whistling.

“Who was that?” I asked.

Gorilla shrugged as if it didn’t matter. “No one in particular. Tord, his name is. Tord Fjordmark. He’s been nagging me about my land here since time began.”

She peered at the planers with great concentration.

“Why?” I asked.

“What?” Gorilla looked up with the same light-hearted face as before. “Yeah! Nah, he wants to build on it. He’s on the Council, and they’ve decided there should be a spa resort out here.” She sniffed with her big black nose. “They’ll make money on it, of course. And they’ve managed to con all the others. Every single house around here is empty and waiting to be

sunk under water. But my land is in the middle of it all, and I won't give in to blackmail. No way." She smiled, as if there wasn't a care in the world. "So, it's not something you need worry about."

I waited a moment for her to say more. But Gorilla nodded at the toilet. "You forgot to close the door," she said, to change the subject.

When I went to close it, I thought I felt something in my belly. Something that clenched. I couldn't forget that Tord's face. His smile, and how those muddy eyes had leeches onto me.

Inside the toilet was the picture of the ship.

"No panic on the *Titanic*," I mumbled as I closed the door and latched it. Then I went and sat in the morning sun. We'd soon be having fried egg sandwiches for lunch.



## Gorilla's new clothes

The red bike was allowed to stay inside, leaning against the chimney. I didn't touch it. Gorilla looked at it sometimes, and then at me, as if she was waiting for something. One morning, when I came out for breakfast, she stood at the stove looking shrewd.

“Morning, morning,” she said.

“Hi,” I said and sat down on the little grass-green stool. TOOOT! I flew up as if I'd been stabbed in the bottom with a needle.

“Ha ha ha, that got you!” Gorilla laughed and slapped her knees.

I ripped open the paper bag I'd sat on. In it was a horn, with a black rubber ball and a shiny funnel.

“What’s this?” I snapped.

“Oh, nothing much,” said Gorilla looking pleased. “Just a little bicycle horn I found in one of the scrap bins out there. I’ve greased it with engine oil.”

I rubbed the back of my trousers. “Yeah,” I said, “but does it have to clutter up my stool?”

Gorilla waggled her hairy eyebrows. “I can screw it onto the bike if you want,” she said, laying a freshly fried egg on my plate.

I pulled the egg between slices of bread with my fingers. Imagine if Gerd saw me do that! “Yeah, you might as well if you have nothing better to do,” I replied after a while with my mouth full. “I don’t care, because I’m not planning to ride the bike anyway.”

“Hrm,” Gorilla grumbled and began folding her own sandwich.

When she’d eaten it, she drained her glass of soda and slammed it on the table with a bang. “So,” she said, getting up. “Put your boots on when you’re done. Then we’ll jump in the car.”

I looked at her. “What do you mean, car?” I said. “Where are we going?”

“Town,” said Gorilla, picking at her teeth with an old goose feather. “Errands, you know.” She turned and lumbered over to her dirty boots. Her trousers were saggy in the crotch.

It was hard to force down the last bites of sandwich. Town. I had no desire to go there and show myself with Gorilla. I didn’t want anyone to know I was hers.

“Listen,” I said. “I’ve got a bit of a stomachache. I think I’ll stay home instead.”

Gorilla wagged a finger. “Sadly, not possible. If I leave you here, you’ll just run off again, I know it. And now you’re my responsibility, whether you want it or not. Come along!”

I slouched from my chair and slowly put my arms into my jacket.

Gorilla put on her cap. “We can stop at the pharmacy and get some medicine for your poor stomach,” she said with a look that meant she hadn’t believed a word about the pain I was in.

We jumped into the green car. The engine started with a rumble. Then we tore off at breakneck speed. We did a 360-degree wheelie in the middle of an intersection, shot straight over a footbridge, and missed a poor old woman on a pedestrian crossing by a whisker.

When we got to town, Gorilla saw a parking space, a little late. She did a handbrake stop and shoved the car between two new, beautiful cars. Then we got out and walked down the street. Tall houses painted in different shades were ranged alongside the pavement. The buildings were of stone, not like in the country. Renfanan was made of wood and only two floors high. Gorilla's house in the industrial area had no upstairs at all, although it had a very high ceiling.

Everyone we met stared at Gorilla. Some sniffed and wrinkled their noses. I tried to walk a little apart from her, so it would look as if I was in town on my own. But Gorilla trotted on and seemed not to care about the looks she was getting. Probably she was used to it.

“We’re going in here.” We’d arrived at a little street where the buildings were narrow and pressed together. Gorilla pulled open a door, making a bell ring.

Inside the lights were dim and it was crowded with furniture. There were tall shelves in rows, and the smell of dust and old leather prickled my nose. Gorilla’s eyes gleamed warmly. They shone as she gazed around, and then she closed them and took a deep breath.

“Do you know what this is?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“A secondhand bookshop,” said Gorilla. “A shop that only sells books. Only used, old books. Look!” She went over to one of the shelves and pointed to a handwritten, yellowing paper stuck on the corner. “Biographies,” she read. “This whole shelf contains only biographies. Stories about different people’s lives. And here we have flora, books about flowers. And over there are the history books.” She looked at me. “Do you know what? I’d much rather have a secondhand bookshop.”



She said it as if it were a secret, something she'd never told anyone before. She rubbed her stubby black fingers over a red book spine. "Much better than scrap. But the industrial area isn't a suitable location. And books are harder to sell than scrap. For some reason." She sighed. "But I would much...much rather..."

"Well, here you are at last," someone said.

A small, pale man in trousers too long for him appeared from behind one of the shelves. He peered at Gorilla through small greasy glasses and bustled



over. “It’s a long time since it’s been so long between visits,” he cheeped with a smile.

Gorilla laughed. “Yeah, I’ve had a bit to do since I was here last, as you can see.” She looked in my direction and proudly straightened her back. “This little lassie is living with me now.”

The man squinted at me. He had a wrinkly face covered in small freckles. “Yeah, I can appreciate that,” he said. “A matchstick. Yes, we matches make good company. That’s good.”

I said nothing, mostly feeling embarrassed. Gerd always complained that I was too skinny. Gorilla must have been a bit embarrassed too.

“Yes, I have that book here for you,” the man continued, and he rummaged in behind the desk. He took out a thick, old book. “This has all its pages still. *Oliver Twist*. An early edition.”

Gorilla ran her hand ecstatically over the dry cover. “Oh, you found it,” she smiled. “Thank you!”

“Yes, I had to pay a lot for it so... I’m afraid you can’t have it cheap.”

“Is that right?” Gorilla looked worried. “What... what do you want for it then?”

The man paused before he answered. “Well... a hundred, actually,” he said.

Gorilla yelped: “What?”

“But, because it’s you, you can have it for eighty,” the man was quick to add. “I can’t go lower than that or I’d be losing on it.”

“Eighty?” muttered Gorilla.

The man looked awkwardly at the desk. “If you can’t pay now, I can hold it for a week.”

Gorilla was desperate. She looked with shining eyes at the dusty old book, and she swallowed many times.

But then she shook her head firmly. “Nope,” she said. “Now there are two of us to support, I can’t be wasteful. But thank you anyway.” She turned stiffly and went towards the door.

I stood where I was, biting my lip thoughtfully. Then I said: “I think you should take it.”

I don’t know why I said it. Maybe because I’d never seen anyone look as happy as Gorilla did when

we stepped into the bookshop. Maybe because I would gladly have bought that book about *Oliver Twist* if I'd been as crazy about books as she was.

She looked at me in surprise and struggled to find words. "But, it's so phenomenally expensive —" she began.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Can't you just buy it, so we get out of here? I can't stand here waiting all day."

Then she nodded. "Of course," she said and hurried over to the counter. The man smiled at me and winked.

Out on the little street again, Gorilla's face shone. She peeked into the bag with her new purchase. "You're right," she said. "One shouldn't miss an opportunity like this. It's good that I bought it."

It was a cold, clear day and the sky was blue overhead. Gorilla trotted with satisfied steps towards the square. "But we need to find something for you, too!" she said at once. "Otherwise it's not fair. Where would you like to look?"

“No, it’s not necessary,” I said, hearing how desperate I sounded. “I don’t want anything; I think we should go home!”

Gorilla wouldn’t hear a word. She took firm hold of my hand and walked deeper into the crowd. “We have all sorts of shops,” she said, pointing as we passed a bakery, a sweet shop, a toy shop with dolls in the window and an art shop with paint and paintbrushes and so on. “We can go anywhere you like.”

Of course, it would have been wonderful to go in and look at a doll or a cake or something, but all I could think about was how everyone was staring. At Gorilla, at me, then back to Gorilla again. I thought I would die.

“Here!” I said and threw myself up the steps to a shop. I just wanted to get away from the street.

Gorilla stumbled after me. “Such haste. Did you see something you wanted in here?”

We had entered a clothing store. On the floor were long, soft rugs, and a couple of lovely assistants were moving around smiling to left and right.

Gorilla put her hands on her hips. “Right,” she said enthusiastically. “You’d like some new clothes? See if you can find something that suits you.”

I let my eyes travel over the rows of jackets and trousers, and over the tables where tops lay in carefully folded squares. My stomach fizzed a little. Down in my boots, my socks were rolled into lumps. They were nubbly and worn. My jeans were thin at the knees and saggy at the back. My jacket was washed-out and dull.

“Yeah, alright. I might as well have a look around,” I said, and went over towards a corner with children’s jackets.

Gorilla began rummaging among the belts in a sale box. “You do that. And don’t worry about the price.”

The jackets felt soft and warm. I put my face into them and sniffed. They smelled new. They came in pink and blue, green and red. I liked them all. Especially the green one. It had inside pockets and shiny lining. If I could only try it on...just to see what it felt like.

It was lovely. Warm and thick and really puffy.

Nearby was a mirror. I went over to look. Very nice. They should see me at Renfanan now, I thought. Gerd and Aaron should see me in this jacket. What would they say then? I guess they'd just gape.

“Do you like this one?”

It was a mother showing a top to her daughter. A blue top, with white ribbing. The girl looked at it. “Maybe,” she said.

The mother read the price tag. She was lovely. She had lipstick on her mouth, and she had pushed her hair behind her ears so it swung inwards.

Suddenly I felt the girl look at me. I was staring at her mother; I must have looked idiotic. I quickly turned away.

“That looks nice,” said the mother then. I glanced at her. She was talking to me! I felt my cheeks burn, but the mother just smiled.

“It suits you,” she said, nodding at the jacket. “You should take it.”

“Yes,” I said, zipping it up in a casual way. “I probably will.”

She laughed. “But it will be your mother who pays, perhaps?”

At first I didn’t know what to say, the words stuck in my throat. But then I nodded. “Yes, of course,” I said, laughing too. “I was just looking to see which one I wanted.”

The mother smiled. “I vote for this one,” she said and winked.

“Hello, little mite!” Gorilla appeared. She grinned her apish grin, and her trousers drooped over her knees. “Have you found something, then?”

The mother’s smile disappeared. Gorilla put her hand to her head and saluted. “Nice day to buy something for your kid, eh?” she said. “And Jonna has her eye on a jacket, I see. Well, we should spoil them, it’s true.” She scratched her hairy stomach and found fluff in her navel.

The mother shivered. The girl stared as if she had matchsticks between her eyelids.

I couldn’t look at them. I just wanted to run away. Why did Gorilla have to come and upset everything?

“Uh, of course,” said the mother. “Sometimes. Excuse me, we were just on our way.” She looked at me the way you look at a kitten with a broken leg, and then they disappeared out the door. Through the shop window I saw them climb onto their bikes. The girl wobbled a bit as they biked away.

I tore off the jacket. “Let’s go home!” I cried and started walking.

Gorilla was right behind me. “Oh, no!” she protested. “Now we’ve bought something for me, we need something for you too.”

She never gave up! On a clothes rack nearby, there was a shiny woman’s dress with roses on it and lace at the hem. I stepped over and pulled out the largest size I could find.

“This one.” I pushed it into Gorilla’s hands.

She stared silently at the dress. “You don’t think it’s a little big?”

“I want it. You said I could choose.”

Gorilla shrugged. “Okay,” she said and went off to pay.



At last, we could leave. I tramped so quickly through town that Gorilla was out of breath from keeping up.

When we got to the car, I held out the bag from the clothes shop. “Here you are,” I said.

She stared at it. “What?”

“It’s for you.”

“For me? No, we were going to buy something for you, that’s what we said!”

“But this is for me,” I said. “It’s a present for me if you wear it. No normal person goes around town with a bare chest.”

Gorilla stood surprised for a couple of moments. Then she sprang into action. She pulled the dress out of the bag. It coiled around her paws like a slippery eel, but she managed to get into it somehow. Then she stood to attention to show it off. She looked like a hairy woodcutter in a nightie.

“Good,” I said. “Much better. That’s what it should look like.”

“Hee-hee.” Gorilla giggled and looked at her flowery belly. “Well, thank you. I’m all dressed up now!”

We jumped into the car and burned out of town.

When we got home, Gorilla was in a hurry. “I’ve been hanging on since this morning,” she snorted, running out the back door.

The new book in the paper bag was lying on the woodstove. And the front door was open.

Now, I thought. This is my chance. I can run away, run and hide far, far away. Go somewhere where Gorilla can never find me.

I’d never have to see her again. Now was my chance.

But then I suddenly saw the bicycle, leaning against the chimney and rusting with loneliness. I thought about the mother and the girl I’d met, and how absurd it looked when the girl cycled off, so wobbly.

Such a simple thing to ride a bike, I thought. You must be able to learn in a few minutes, surely?

I walked over to the bike and rolled it out into the room. I put my hands on the handlebars and threw over one leg...I put my feet straight onto the pedals.

**CRASH!**

My heart almost stopped. I was lying on the floor with one leg bent at the wrong angle. My hand stung and burned, the saddle was cutting into my belly. To top it off, Gorilla's voice rumbled in the doorway.

“Ah ha, you're finally biking! HA! HA! HA!”

The tears came in a rush. “No, you can see I'm not!” I cried. I wanted to hit her. My head was throbbing with anger about idiotic bicycles, hairy bodies in party dresses, people who stared and beautiful mothers. Tears rolled down my cheeks. “I'm bleeding!”

Gorilla was beside herself. She rushed over and carefully lifted away the bike. “Dear oh dear,” she murmured. “Where? Where are you bleeding?”

I held out my hand. It was grazed. Gorilla lifted me into her arms. She was soft and warm. The new dress smelled nice.

I pushed my face into her fur and wrapped my arms around her neck. Then she went still. It was lovely when she held me like that. She trembled a little. Then she patted me on the head.

“Little mite,” she said. “I should have been here holding on while you were trying it out. It’s my fault.”

I nodded.

“Shall we clean your cut?” she asked. “Then try again?”

I was silent a moment.

“Okay,” I mumbled.



## Big business

I couldn't actually learn to ride a bike in a few minutes. But I could in a week. Gorilla said it was so quick because I was extra talented.

"A gifted child," she declared firmly every time I swung past her in the backyard. The days had grown colder, and I borrowed Gorilla's cap with the houndstooth pattern. It was a little big, but at least it hid all the tangles I'd got since I stopped brushing my hair. I jammed a bike helmet on top.

"Watch out, here I come!" I shrieked, skidding in beside Gorilla, who was trying to convince a customer to buy a couple of old car wheels.

"They roll both ways, backwards and forwards, you

have my word on that,” she said, thumping a fist into her palm. “Going for a song.”

The customer, a man with beard and a greedy face, peered crossly at the wheels. “A song?” he muttered. “I don’t know. A moment ago it was twenty for both, and now you say forty each.”

Gorilla tried to laugh. “Hahahahaa,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s the handwriting. So easy to misread.”

The man glared. “Really? If you ask me, it sounds like fraud. I’ll give you twenty or nothing. Last offer.”

Gorilla looked pointedly away and accepted the banknote. She shot an embarrassed look in my direction, but the man grabbed his wheels and strutted cheerfully out of the yard.

Gorilla sighed and went over to the shoebox where she kept the money. She lifted the lid and bit her bottom lip anxiously. There was not much in it.

Then she noticed me watching her. She thrust away the box and strolled lightly across the yard, whistling cheerily.

I biked after her. “I have an idea,” I said, taking care not to wobble off. It was hard to keep your balance when you went slowly.

“Indeed?” Gorilla kept walking.

“Yes. An idea for how we could make a little more money.”

She stopped and turned in surprise. “Really?”

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot. Ever since the time the lady wanted to buy my bike. I think it will work. Do you want to hear it?”

Gorilla crossed her arms. “Why not?”

And while I explained my idea, Gorilla listened intently. When I’d finished, she scratched her chin and clapped her hands together. “It’s worth a try,” she said. “We might as well test it out today.”

An hour or two later I sat in the backyard pounding crooked nails with a hammer, so they’d straighten out and look like new. Suddenly I heard a yell from Gorilla. She came lumbering like a furious steam roller, with a nervous man wearing a coat at her heels.

“What have you done?” she ranted, fixing her eyes on me. She held up an old car door handle. “Mercedes! Unavailable in all of Europe! Hand-turned in the forties! Leather grip! And you put it in the bargain box!”

I was with her right away. “Whoops!” I said. “Was it a Mercedes handle? I thought it was a doorstep.”

“A doorstep?!” yelled Gorilla. “I’ve never heard anything so stupid! The company could have gone broke!”

“Oy, oy, oy,” squeaked the man. “I had no idea that door handle was so rare.”

“A rarity indeed,” growled Gorilla, holding up the grubby little handle. “Whoever gets hold of this can count themselves lucky.”

The man gazed at the door handle, impressed. Gorilla turned to me with a piercing gaze. “Taking coins for this, Jonna. You should be ashamed of yourself! I’ll take pleasure in thinking out a hard punishment for you.”

The man looked terrified, but Gorilla just rolled



her eyes. “This good-for-nothing,” she sighed. “Goodness, she’s done so much damage since she started here. Once she sold a moped that had belonged to the actual prime minister for peanuts. I think I’ll let her sleep on glowing coals tonight, it usually does the trick.”

The man swallowed and looked pityingly at me. “Surely that’s not necessary?” he said. “You discovered the mistake in good time. I’ll willingly pay what the handle is worth.”

Gorilla nodded. “Kind of you to forgive a stupid child. And just for that, I’ll make it cheaper. Two hundred, and Jonna will add in a few new, straight nails as a bandage on the sore, as it were.”

The man nodded and took out his wallet. With a shaking hand, he passed over the notes and received the door handle and a fistful of nails from Gorilla. He nodded at me briefly, which probably meant something like, hope it goes okay and that you avoid the glowing coals. Then he disappeared like a shot through the gates.

Gorilla gave me one of the notes. “Now then,” she said. “Now I smell big business.”

The next day a man arrived in a hunting cap and leather jacket. He was an antique dealer, he said, looking for bargains to sell in his shop. Gorilla started hunting around for scrap of sufficient age.

I found a box of old Christmas decorations. In it was a lantern with a curly handle. *Memory from Santaland* was written on the sticker, which I scraped away.

“Here’s that thing you said was too nice to sell and should go to the museum!” I shouted to Gorilla. “Where did you say I should put it?”

The man in the leather jacket pricked up his ears. Gorilla rushed over. “Oh,” she said, taking the lantern. “That, yes. That needs to go in a padded box...”

She glanced at the man. He was staring at the lantern as if his eyes might pop out and fall to the ground.

“Ah, this one,” said Gorilla. “It’s not for sale. It was silly of the girl to mention it. A specialist like you can see it’s too fine to be sold in a shop.”

The man nodded. “Really,” he said. “Wonderful handiwork.”

“Yep,” said Gorilla. “From the right customer... you can probably get upwards of four thousand.”

The man’s mouth was making nervous quivers.

“That’s right,” said Gorilla. “Four thousand at least. Because it’s likely to date from—?”

“Not a day later than the sixteen hundreds,” the man said decisively, taking out his wallet. “I certainly can appreciate old bits and pieces. Might we come to an agreement?” He took out a little stack of large notes.

Gorilla began scraping one foot in the mud. “Embarrassing that the girl should let on that we had it,” she said. “I might have to cut off one of her little fingers, so she learns once and for—”

The man looked in horror from me to Gorilla. “C-C-Cut what...?”

“Off.” Gorilla clipped her fingers together like scissors. “It’s the only way to bang knowledge into the brats if you ask me. Oh boy, so many times I had my fingers cut off when I was a child.”

She turned and began to stroll across the yard. The man held a bundle of notes after her. “Eight hundred!” he called. “You can buy a lot with that!”

Gorilla stopped and stepped slowly back. “My good man,” she said sternly. “Antique is antique.”

“A thousand,” the man cut in and dug out some more notes. “I can appreciate . . .”

“Yeah yeah,” interrupted Gorilla, who was tired of the man’s boasting. “A thousand then. But I can’t give you a receipt because I’d be put away.”

“Excellent,” said the man.

“Excellent,” said Gorilla.

From that day on, things looked different in Gorilla’s shoebox. People would pay incredible sums for scrap when they believed a child had made a mistake. Gorilla and I made money from morning till night.

Time passed, and I stopped longing to leave the scrapyard. The evenings got colder, but inside the house it was warm. Gorilla’s black fur stuck in my blanket with the brown gingerbread hearts on it.

The broken gnome was at home on my bedside table. The toothbrush lay in the drawer, forgotten. My hair grew more tangled and my jeans dirtier and dirtier. In the end, I didn't want it any other way. Who had time to wash themselves and shake sheets when there were more important things in life? Like biking, for example. Or reading books. Or earning a fortune from scrap. Or sitting on Gorilla's knee, eating fried egg sandwiches and listening to the rain slashing at the ceiling panes, to the wind that tugged and tore at the walls and the fire that crackled in the woodstove, all those dark evenings as the winter drew in.



## The caravan

Soon I had to wear my scarf and gloves when I biked around in the backyard. Gorilla had built an obstacle course out of old scrap. A plank leaned against a dishwasher turned on its side, and you had to bike up it. Then another plank carried you down the other side. After that, you had to bike in a tight figure of eight around two big barrels, then slalom between seven broom handles stuck into the mud. The hardest was a single plank that lay over a trestle. You had to bike up it and then the plank tipped over and you biked down the other side. Gorilla always wanted to stand alongside and watch when I biked the plank.

This morning I had already biked up and down the seesaw three times when Gorilla came out from the house. Her dress was bed-wrinkled and her trousers had rolled themselves above her knees. She snarled like a lion as she stretched.

“What a wonderful morning,” she said scratching her stomach. “The air is clear as sausage water.”

I skidded in front of her and pressed the bike horn. TOOT! “Look what’s come in,” I said. My mouth steamed, and my cheeks were red. There was frost in the tufts of grass in the backyard.

Gorilla looked around. Outside the gates stood a round, murky-white caravan leaning at one corner where a wheel was broken. “What the heck!” said Gorilla. “That hulk is completely blocking our entrance. Someone must have dumped it in the night.”

“Cool, eh?” I said. “Can we keep it?”

Gorilla wrinkled her nose. “No-o!”

“Yes!” I leaped from my bike and threw myself at her with clasped hands. “Pleeease! Come on, let’s go and look at it!”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Gorilla, trying to sound annoyed. But she couldn’t help smiling.

It was quite shabby. Inside were burnt-orange seats and a small kitchen with a gas stove. “Do you know what we can use it for in summer?” I said, pulling up the little blue blind at the back. “A bookshop! You can open the back window and hand out the books.”

Gorilla scratched her chin and got a dreamy look in her eyes. “That would be something. Something better than old junk. Imagine, eh?”

But then she shook her head. “No. Now we have to get it away from the entrance. I’ll get the car.” She squeezed out through the tiny door. “Back soon.”

I looked around. I desperately hoped no one would buy the caravan. You could pull the cushions out to make beds and there were stainless steel mugs and plates in a cupboard. I pushed up the back window and looked out. Gorilla and Jonna’s Secondhand Bookshop. Gorilla and Jonna’s Book Kiosk, maybe. We could travel into town with it. Park it in the square and sleep over. Just wake up in the morning and open



the hatch, and outside people would be crowded around, wanting to buy books.

It wasn't long before Gorilla came skidding around the corner. She had trouble backing the car so that the tow bar ended up in the right place. She accelerated and braked, the car floundered like a ship in a heavy sea, and the engine screamed in distress.

"Am I straight?" she shouted through the wound-down window.

"You have to go right!"

"What?"

"More to the riiiiight!"

Gorilla waved. "Okay!"

After a lot of trouble, the car was lined up. Gorilla ejected herself from the driver's seat and hooked up the caravan.

"There," she said, putting her fists on her hips. "We'll drive it in."

We jumped into the car and Gorilla started to accelerate. Vrooom! The car didn't move. "What's the matter now?" She tried again. The engine roared

like twelve sawmills. “Something’s not right,” she complained.

“Hrm,” I said. “There’s a problem with that wheel.”

Gorilla turned off the engine, opened the door and squinted back at the caravan. “Ach! I’d forgotten.” She put a finger on her chin and scratched as she sank into thought.

“We’ll do this,” she said after a moment. “I’ll get out and push, while you sit in here and steer for your life.”

I stared at her. “Me?” I said. “Steer by myself?”

I had actually thought a lot about what Gorilla had asked that first day on the steps of Renfanan. If I wanted to learn to drive. I didn’t think she was right in the head then, but now I felt my stomach fizz.

Gorilla thought for another moment. “I can’t see any other way,” she said. “I’ll try and lift it at the problem corner, and push with my hip. Yell out if you get into trouble.”

With those words she stepped around to the back of the caravan. I jumped over into the driver’s seat and sat down. Then I changed my mind and got on

my knees instead, because otherwise I couldn't see. I grabbed the big black steering wheel.

“Ready?” called Gorilla.

“Yes!” I yelled and my smile went all the way to my ears. “Yes! Push!”

“Heave!!” went Gorilla. “Arrrgh-hrrrr!” She roared and grunted. The car began to move forwards. Slowly, slowly we slid through the mud.

“That’s good!” I shouted. “A bit more!”

“Are you steering?” puffed Gorilla.

“Yes!” I turned the wheel a little to the right to avoid crashing into the gates. “A bit more!” I called.

When the car and the caravan were finally in place, I shrieked, “Stop!” and jumped out. I ran around to the back of the caravan. Gorilla was a wreck and sat with her tongue hanging out. Her eyes were glazed and her fur was shiny with sweat.

“Whoa,” she puffed. “I won’t do that again today.” She got up on shaky legs and banged her fist triumphantly against the caravan. “But there was no other way.”

“Nah,” I said, hopping from side to side. “Except we could have fixed the wheel first with all these parts lying around and driven it in the normal way.”

I hopped away over the mud. Gorilla stared dumbly after me. After a moment she frowned and stuck out her bottom lip. “Did you have that genius idea in your nog the whole time, without saying anything?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Not the whole time. From about when you started to push, but then it was too much fun.”

Gorilla crossed her arms. “Humph,” she said. “I just about busted myself.”

I stopped hopping. “Sorry,” I said. “But it was really fun.”

Gorilla pursed her lips and looked at me. “Was it?”

“Mmm,” I said. “And I thought of another thing.”

“And that would be?”

I dragged it out a little. I didn’t want her to say no. “Did you mean what you said that time?” I asked. “About... that you could teach me to drive? The car?”

Gorilla thought carefully. She looked very stern.

“Humph!” she said then. “I’m actually more responsible than that. But of course I was serious.”

I flew into her arms. “Can I try right now?” I asked. “Now today?!”

Gorilla laughed. “Well,” she said, “it’ll probably be fine. But we’ll begin at the beginning.”



## Fine dining

“Tight turn to the left on three, two, one, now!”

I swung sharp left, and Gorilla spun the old barber’s chair I was sitting on. “Screee!” she cried, to sound like a skidding car.

She’d ripped the steering wheel out of the car for me to get the feel of it. On the right of the barber’s chair, a worn-out golf club was stuck into the mud to represent a gear stick. Directly behind it was an umbrella, and that was the handbrake.

“That’s good!” said Gorilla. “Easy turn right now.”

I turned right.

“Brrrrmmm!” nodded Gorilla. “Don’t forget to toot every time you turn, because then you’ve got yourself

covered if anyone's in the way. Accelerate out of the curve."

I pressed the horn and accelerated with my right foot on the scrubbing brush down in the mud. "Toot-tooooot! Perfect," Gorilla praised me. "And don't forget you can only go through a red light if you've got your speed up. Okay, handbrake turn on three. One! Two! Three! Now!"

I pulled on the umbrella. Gorilla spun the chair half a turn. "Exactly," she said. "You're a fast learner, and soon you'll be driving for real. But right now, we need food."

It was Saturday. We'd been having driving lessons every day for almost a week and my arms were tired because the steering wheel was heavy. I was longing to drive a real car, but Gorilla wanted to do everything properly, and it was safer if she drove the car until I was a fully fledged driver, she said.

A moment later, Gorilla came over to the table with the hot frying pan. "Madam," she said, flourishing the spatula. "Dinner is served."



I swallowed and looked at my plate.

“Hrm,” I said. “Just for once I’d like to eat something besides fried egg sandwiches, Gorilla. If that’s possible.”

Gorilla looked nonplussed.

“I don’t mean they’re not good,” I was quick to add. “It’s just that we’ve eaten fried egg sandwiches every day, ever since I arrived. It’s starting to be a little repetitive.”

Gorilla nodded. “Of course,” she said. “It didn’t occur to me. For years, I’ve had only myself to cook for.” She shook her head. Then she whipped away



my egg and threw it in the bin. “Little mite,” she said. “You must have fried eggs coming out your ears when you sneeze. Never another egg in this house!”

She caught sight of her own plate where the egg still lay, resolutely picked it up and tossed it over her shoulder. Ploof! The egg landed in a boot. I laughed at her.

“So,” said Gorilla. “My utmost apologies, Madam. What would you like?”

I shrugged. “What would you like?”

Gorilla brightened. “A restaurant, perhaps? Yes! We’ll go to town and eat Saturday dinner, right now. Right this minute!”

And so we did, but first we tidied ourselves up. I dug out an old brush from the pantry and stood a long time in front of the mirror that hung on the chimney.

Gorilla padded around, thinking about what she would order. “Beef medallions are tasty,” she said. “That’s a good meal. Or sole with remoulade sauce. Mmm...”

I was having big problems with the knots in my hair. “It’s impossible to get rid of them all,” I said. “But I suppose it looks okay.”

Gorilla nodded. She took a grey man’s jacket from a nail inside the door. It still had almost all its buttons. Then she wiped the mud from my boots.

“No one can complain,” she said, puffing out her chest. I looked at her, she looked great. Big and strong and beautiful, like a freshly painted tractor.

The last thing I did was to put on the houndstooth cap. “Ready,” I said, and felt a buzzing in my belly.

“Ready,” said Gorilla. “Now you and I are off to do some fine dining.”

The abandoned industrial area was quiet and empty. The streetlights cast their yellow glow over the road and made long shadows. Gorilla didn’t drive so fast this time. She pointed right and left and talked.

There was a beautiful old neon sign that no longer shone with the words *Pearson’s Garage* on it. “That was a workshop once upon a time,” she said. “You

could get anything you wanted oiled up and working again. He had a dachshund, Pearson did. When the authorities came it would bite them on the leg. Pearson refused to sell for a long time.” She became morose. “But then they got him. They made it look as if the house had rising damp. He was forced to renovate it for hundreds of thousands, and he couldn’t afford it. So he had to sell.”

She sighed, but then she got a second wind. “Over there was the sausage factory. When they didn’t want to sell, Tord Fjordmark and his cronies opened a new sausage factory on the other side of town. It wasn’t long before they had outcompeted these poor guys over here and, well... that’s how it went. They sold too.”

She drove quietly on. The round, toxic-yellow signs on sticks were everywhere and looked eerie.

“Stop a minute?” I said.

Gorilla braked. I pressed my nose to the window and read the words in red: *On this site, the municipality is building northern Europe’s largest spa.*

In the middle of the sign was a hand doing a perky thumbs-up. Beneath it: *A municipality for progress.*

Gorilla sniffed. “Yeah, thanks a lot. It’s great to boast of progress when you carry it out by blackmail.”

She drove on, her face grim. “But they can’t squeeze me out. Because I’m not the cowardly type. Them and their spa can take a running jump.”

My stomach was clenching again. I could see that man Tord’s terrible smile. What if he did manage to get his hands on the scrapyard? Where would we go?

I shook the thought away. No panic on the *Titanic*. I leaned back in my seat. As long as we had each other, things wouldn’t be so bad. We rolled on through swathes of yellow streetlight.

In town, we parked in the square. My body was fizzing. I’d never been to a restaurant in my entire life. The shops were closed, and there weren’t many people around. We walked quite slowly, to draw out the moment.

But before long, we stopped in front of a green door with a glass pane that said *The Grand*. “Here we

are,” said Gorilla. The doorbell pinged as we stepped inside.

It smelled so good, my mouth drooled. Guitar music plinked from speakers in the ceiling. Everywhere people were sitting and having a good time. The walls were covered in paintings of ships, and Spanish dancers in polka dot dresses. Gorilla hung her jacket on the back of a chair.

“Table for two?” she asked with a confident gesture. I pulled off my jacket and put my cap on the chair beside me.

Soon a man with a tidy little beard and shirt came and handed us each a wine-red folder. “Welcome,” he said politely. “The menus.”

Gorilla blinked at me. “Now you must choose whatever you like,” she said. “And we’ll end with something sweet too.”

*Pizza* was first. Then various pasta dishes.

“What does *à la carte* mean?” I asked.

Gorilla stretched. “It means it’s the best,” she said.

I spelled my way through the long words:

*Fillet of beef*

*Pork fillet*

*Kebab*

*Steak*

*Plank steak*

*Chicken à la king*

*Seafood salad*

“There’s such a lot,” I said. “Everything sounds good.”

Gorilla was settling in. She took a toothpick from a holder on the table and nibbled it. “I’ll have the beef fillet,” she said. “That’s the best.”

I pondered a bit longer. “Chicken *à la king*,” I said, closing the menu. “And ginger ale.”

I had no idea what *à la king* meant, but I liked chicken. At Renfanan we occasionally had it with white sauce.

*À la king* meant good. There were mushrooms in the sauce. I tried to eat nice and slowly, but it was hard. The chicken tasted too delicious. Gorilla had the same problem. Several times she put down

her knife and fork. “Nope,” she mumbled with her mouth full. “You shouldn’t shovel your food in, it’s not good for the stomach.”

“This is the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” I said. “Same for you?”

Gorilla nodded and tried to smile without spilling potato from her mouth. “Absolutely. Now we’re living well. Business is going like a dream, and the beef fillet melts like butter in your mouth. Not a worry in the world.”

The waiter came and showed a pair of new guests to a table, a woman with her hair in a tight bun and long sharp nails, and her husband. The husband wore braces and had short, short hair that looked a little prickly on the top of his round head.

“Good evening.” Gorilla greeted them politely and raised her glass. I felt proud that she was so dashing.

The man tried to smile, but the woman put a stop to it. “Don’t talk to her,” she whispered. “If you utter so much as a squeak to a drunk, you won’t be able to shut her up all evening.”

Gorilla frowned and went back to her potato wedges. I put a mushroom in my mouth, but suddenly it was hard to swallow. I saw from the corner of my eye how the couple were looking at us. “Poor girl,” the woman hissed. “It can’t be lawful to allow a child to live with that type. She doesn’t even have a proper pair of shoes.”

Gorilla began to be nervous and clumsy. She dropped her fork on the floor with a clatter. “Whoops,” she said, smiling in embarrassment at the other table. She quickly picked up the fork and wiped it on her clothes. Then she carried on eating.

The woman looked as if a stink bomb had gone off under her nose. “Did you see that?” she whispered to the man, poking him in the arm. “How can they even let her in here? We’ll see how happy they are later when she can’t pay. Oh no, I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the man muttered. “Best take no notice.”

The woman reached into her handbag and fished out a crisp banknote. “Something has to be done when



a child has it tough like that,” she said. And with a prim smile she turned to Gorilla. “Excuse me. This is to go towards new shoes for the girl.”

Gorilla stared in silence at the note.

“Don’t you dare use the money on drink!” the woman said sternly. “This is intended for a worthy cause.”

My cheeks burned. I was sure the whole restaurant was staring at us. I wanted to run out of there. I felt sick and Gorilla just stared at the note.



But then she began to breathe heavily. Her stomach rose and fell, faster and faster, as if she couldn't get enough air.

"Put your cap on," she growled.

I looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Haven't I told you to wear your cap at dinner?!" she barked.

"No..." I said, but Gorilla interrupted.

"Yes! I have, and you should listen and do as I say!"

The woman took back her money fearfully. I put on my cap.

"That's better," muttered Gorilla. "I want to see a cap on at the dinner table."

I recognized her tone. The woman and her husband were silenced. They just stared at us.

"Don't sit there like a lady!" Gorilla carried on. "Just use your fork! It's snobby to use a knife!"

"Sorry," I said, hiding my smile in the napkin.

"Take note! There's no need for children to mess around with napkins! I had to wipe my face on my arm when I was small, and it never hurt me!"

She took a potato wedge in her fingers and put it in her mouth. Laughter bubbled up inside me. I had to turn away and pretend to cough. I hadn't been prepared for suddenly playing this game.

When I'd finished laughing, my eyes were full of tears. "Sorry," I squeaked. "I forgot."

"Yes, you forget and forget!" Gorilla growled so the potato flew from her mouth. "Now put your feet on the table. You're my child, and you'll learn to do as I do!"

I leaned and put my feet on the table.

"That's better," said Gorilla. She was sticking out one foot when the waiter with the little beard went past and gave her an irritated look. She pulled it back and muttered, "Yep, you can... you can swing a bit on your chair too. I'll knock those fussy orphanage habits out of you! Even if I have to roll you in muck myself! Now we'll have pudding. And you'll have a brandy."

She turned to the pair who were sitting stupefied. "May I offer you a Peach Melba?" she asked. "And a little chat about life?"



They didn't answer. The woman launched up out of her chair and the man coughed out something about their parking time running out. In a few seconds they had disappeared from The Grand.

Gorilla blinked at me. "Now we'll have something sweet," she said.

I was quiet in the car on the way home. In the time I'd been at the scrapyards, I'd forgotten what people thought of Gorilla when they didn't know what she was really like. It felt an eternity since I'd seen her for

the first time, when I'd shuddered at her ugly trousers and her terrible grin.

Gorilla wasn't like other people. She never wrinkled her nose at anyone and never raised her voice unnecessarily. She was herself, and by now I didn't want her any other way. Others could change themselves if they had to.

Gorilla glanced at me. "Are you sad?"

I shook my head. "No."

Probably I should have felt sad. But I didn't care anymore about the woman and her money. She was surely a thousand times sadder than I was, because her evening out had been spoiled.

"People are people," I said.

Gorilla let loose a roar of laughter. "I couldn't have said it better myself!" she growled pressing her foot to the floor. "Oh, my, what a sensible little mite I've got!"



## New worries

There are no worries in the world. That's what Gorilla said as we sat at The Grand restaurant. But she was wrong.

The day after our dinner the rain was spattering in great drops on the ceiling windows. Gorilla sat reading the book she'd got from the secondhand bookshop. *Oliver Twist*. She'd read it before, but she thought it was so good she said she could read it a hundred times more. No one was crazier about books than she was. One day, out of curiosity, I counted how many she had. Gorilla stood beside me, telling me firmly that she had no more than five hundred. Imagine her shock when I finished counting and

told her she had three thousand one hundred and two!

I sat on Gorilla's bed leafing through a book I'd found when I was counting, about famous rally drivers through the ages. Because I was learning to drive a car myself, I thought it would be good to snap up a few tips from the great masters.

Now and then Gorilla looked up at me. "You must read this some time," she said. "There are some special things about it. Look."



She held up *Oliver Twist* and put a black finger beside one of the words. “Adventyr,” she said. “Isn’t that strange? The book is so old that the spelling is different. Adventure is spelled *adventyr*.”

And it actually was strange that she happened to be talking about adventure just then. A short moment later, the greatest adventure of my life, and Gorilla’s, would begin. The worries would not be over for quite a while.

When someone knocked at the door, Gorilla looked up in surprise. “What now?” she said, putting aside her book. “It’s Sunday.”

Before she reached the door, there was more knocking, almost banging.

“Yes, yes!” called Gorilla, turning the key. “You’ll make a hole in the door!”

When she opened it, I felt my stomach tighten into an aching knot. It was that Tord, back again.

He was as wet as a sodden sponge. His brown hat drooped. “Are you going to let me in?” he called through the squalling rain.



Gorilla put her hands on her hips. “Don’t know if I will!” she called back. “Can’t we have a little peace on the weekends anymore?”

“Ugh!” Tord pushed himself into the warm room. He took his hat off and shook it. Drops flew and landed on the woodstove where they hissed. Then he stroked back the hair that had stuck on his forehead. When he saw me, he smiled.

“Hi, you,” he said. His eyes looked steely and flat. Like a dead fish’s.

Gorilla pushed out her chest. “I’ve told you to leave her alone,” she growled.

I grabbed the enormous horse blanket Gorilla put over herself when she slept. I crept under it and spied on them through a gap.

Tord stepped confidently into the room. He put his hat on a chair and looked at all the mess, the piles of books, the dishes on the floor and the broken windowpanes.

“Ah ha, this is what you have. Lovely,” he said, although clearly he meant the opposite.

Gorilla padded over and grabbed his arm, hard. “I’m tired of you!” she growled, tugging him towards the door. “You will go out and never come back!”

But Tord pulled himself free. “Stop it!” he hissed. “You’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

He glanced in my direction. “I’ve been at the Renfanan orphanage.”

I started when he said the name. Gorilla’s rage disappeared. “Yes?” she said, dryly.

Tord nodded. “Yes. Because I am chair of the Council, I do inspections of the town’s orphanages now and then. So a while ago I was at Renfanan. And of course, you’d been there too.”

Gorilla swallowed. “Everything was done according to the rules there,” she said. “I have signed papers from the manager and everything.”

Tord smiled. “Mmm,” he said. “D’you know, when an adoption is to take place, you have to be careful. You can’t hand over a child to any old body on a whim. And when I saw that you had a child out here, of course it got me thinking.”

He began to pace back and forth. “But when I went to Renfanan things became clear. Because when I mentioned you and your child, the manager became so nervous that in no time she’d told me how it came about. Clearly Renfanan had been overcrowded, something they’d get marked down for. And the very day the letter about my visit of inspection arrived at the orphanage, so did you. She saw her chance to get rid of a child, even though she knew it was wrong.”

He shook his head. “Your kind can’t take care of a child.”

Gorilla looked terrified. “What, no, you can’t do a thing,” she said. “I have papers, signed—”

“Signatures can be invalidated,” said Tord.

That came like a knife in my belly. “No!” I shouted, throwing off the blanket and running to Gorilla. I clung to her leg.

Gorilla patted me on the head. She seemed to have found her voice again. “There, there, there,” she said steadily.

Tord sucked in his cheeks. “A committee has been appointed to visit here tomorrow at three,” he said. “The committee will inspect the home, and then decide whether the girl should return to the orphanage.”

Gorilla drilled her eyes into him. “May I ask what sort of members are on that committee?”

“Oh.” Tord shrugged. “I doubt you’d know anyone. Although of course I’m on it.”

Gorilla nodded bitterly. “Is that right?”

“Yep,” said Tord.

He looked at her for a long time. “Well, are you going to rethink?”

“What exactly should I be rethinking?” Gorilla asked, her upper lip raised and showing her teeth.

“Don’t play stupid, I haven’t the time,” Tord said shortly.

Gorilla puffed out her upper body and laid a hand on my shoulder. “Blackmail doesn’t work on me,” she said loudly and firmly. “Come here with your committee. We’ll see what you can find to mark against us.”

Tord gave a tired sigh. “Something tells me it won’t be hard,” he said.

He stepped over to the chair and picked up his wet hat. He looked around the room once more, smiled, and put his hat on his head. Finally, he left.

I ran and slammed the door after him.

Then I looked at Gorilla. Her eyes were small and anxious. “It...it will probably go all right,” she murmured. “We’ve survived worse things than inspections.”

She cast her eyes over the mess. “Hrm. Although maybe we should clean up a little.”



## The committee's inspection visit

The next day Gorilla lifted the big Persian rug out to the yard, and we scrubbed the floor. Gorilla's fur was full of bubbles, she strode around like a snowman with scrubbing brushes in her paws, and she scrubbed. Her feet slid here and there across the floor and her face grew shiny with sweat.

Then we picked up all the scrap that was scraggled around the house. We crammed every single kitchen cupboard full. One of them I had to close with my hand still inside, to stop everything falling out again. I whipped my hand out through the gap, shoved the door shut quick as lightning, then fastened it with a

wide piece of tape. For safety's sake, I wrote a note and stuck it on the door: **DO NOT OPEN.**

We cleaned the windows with vinegar and newspaper; we rubbed rust from the tap; we tackled piles of dirty dishes; we built a neat pyramid of the books that didn't fit on the shelves, and we made Gorilla's bed with clean sheets Gorilla had no idea she owned that we found tucked away in a kitchen cupboard. As for the spider webs peppering the ceiling and other places, we couldn't bring ourselves to tear them down. We thought they somehow contributed to the cozy atmosphere in the house, and presumably the committee members would think the same.

"Ooh," groaned Gorilla, sinking into the armchair. "That's my cleaning done for a couple of years."

I looked around and shivered. The room was so beautiful, it even smelled important and special. This cleanness was somehow different from what we'd had at Renfanan. It was our own, not something Gerd had forced on us with shouting and yelling.

It was exactly clean enough, not so exaggerated and spotless you hardly dared put your feet down.

Gorilla's eyes shone. "That's it," she said confidently. "Let them come, those vultures from the Council."

At three o'clock there was a knock on the front door. The door opened and a woman stuck her head in. "Good afternoon," she said. She had a voice that sounded as if she'd eaten a bucket of sand for breakfast; the sort of voice that makes plants shrivel. Her mouth was a fiery red and narrow as a line.

Gorilla hurried over. "I was on my way to open the door," she said.

The woman, Tord and another man walked past Gorilla and into the house. Tord looked indifferent, as if he'd never met Gorilla or me before. "You take notes," he said to the other man.

The man nodded and took pen and notebook from his briefcase. He had light wavy hair, a sharp nose and a red jacket. On his feet were shiny white shoes.

"Now," Tord said to Gorilla. "This committee has been appointed to inspect you and your home,



to determine whether you are a suitable parent for this girl, whom you adopted from the orphanage Renfanan in September this year. Understood?”

Gorilla swallowed nervously. “Before the inspection begins,” she said, “I would like to say that Jonna and I are getting along very happily together. If that is of any interest.”

The light-haired man nodded and wrote in his notebook.

“Hr-hrm!” Tord looked stern. “What if we have a look for ourselves before we go taking notes?” The light-haired man’s cheeks flushed and he put a line through what he’d written.

The committee went further into the house, but no one had bothered to take their shoes off first. Gorilla and I looked in annoyance at their muddy tracks.

“Right,” said Tord. “If you could begin by showing us the girl’s room?”

Gorilla padded over to the little bleached hammock. “Yes, we have Jonna’s quarters right here,” she said proudly. “Come in, come in.”

Tord and the others looked around. They were like three visitors in a museum. The woman fingered everything that came to hand and Tord tugged at the strings attached to the hammock. “Absolutely a hazard,” he mumbled. “The ropes are rotten.”

The light-haired man took notes. “H-a-z-a-r-d,” he spelled out.

The woman’s claw-fingers found the bedside table. She pulled open the drawer and fished out my toothbrush. There was a cobweb on it. She looked doubtfully first at me and then Gorilla. I smiled as nicely as I could with my mouth closed and Gorilla laughed innocently. “Details like that make a place homely,” she said. “Don’t you agree?”

No one replied. Tord raised an eyebrow meaningfully and the light-haired man made a note. “Shall we proceed?” said Tord.

“Of course.” Gorilla led the way to the kitchen. “Welcome, welcome. Here are the pantry and fridge and all the other things. And the crockery is freshly washed, as always.”

The woman immediately put a claw on one of the cupboard handles.

“Not that cupboard!” I yelled. “It...it’s broken.”

Tord became curious. “*Do not open,*” he read on the note that sat on the door. “Is that right? What sort of secrets are you hiding in here?”

“No!” I said.

Too late—Tord dragged away the piece of tape that kept the cupboard closed. Pop! it went first, when a table tennis ball hit him on the head. Then the other contents of the cupboard followed with a terrible crash: rolls of toilet paper, bowls, a sewing machine, the pieces for a gingerbread house, an electric whisk, a lamp, a door handle, five pewter candlesticks, painting rollers and brushes, screwdrivers, a hammer, a vacuum cleaner and, last, a sack of cement. Everything fell over Tord who stood paralyzed, buried to the waist.

There was a moment of silence. Then the woman rushed desperately over to Tord. “You’ll get tetanus!” she cried, turning furiously to Gorilla. “You could have said something!”

“I tried—” I began, but Gorilla interrupted: “Goodness, my-my-my, so silly! I beg a thousand times for forgiveness, this is entirely my fault. Shall I get a bandage?”

Tord crossly tried to wipe sickly green paint from his white shirt. “Note,” he hissed at the light-haired man. “Now we will inspect the yard, so we can finish up in good time.”

Gorilla hurried to the back door. “This way, this way,” she said, opening it. “Then we have coffee for those who’d like it.”

No one answered.

When the light-haired man reached the door he stopped, aghast. “Oh dear, I’ve just bought new shoes.” He gave his elegant white shoes an anxious look.

Gorilla brightened. “No worries, no worries,” she said reassuringly, and ran off. She came straight back with a pair of sturdy boots. “Please, borrow these, and save your own fine footwear.”

The light-haired man put a foot in one boot and pulled it straight out. Alarmed, he fished an old fried

egg from inside. He stared at it, as if he couldn't understand what it was.

Gorilla grabbed the egg.

"So, that's where I put it," she said. "I'd been wondering." She put the egg in her pocket. "Let's go."

I followed the committee, my steps heavy. My stomach ached and my heart pounded anxiously in my chest. I had a feeling the inspection wasn't going well. "No panic on the *Titanic*," I mumbled, pulling the houndstooth cap over my ears.

Outside, Tord and the other man began looking at all the things for sale. To be honest, they seemed less interested in the inspection than in finding bargains. Tord pulled a ship in a bottle from a wooden box.

"How do they do that?" said the light-haired man, his eyes wide. "How do they get it in there?"

"Shush," hissed Tord. "It might be valuable." He held up the bottle. "What do you want for this piece of junk?" he called to Gorilla.

"Oh nothing, nothing at all," she insisted. "Please, it's a gift for the committee from the company."

“Thanks,” said Tord, putting the bottle under his arm without looking at Gorilla.

The woman tripped around in a pair of high heels, trying to avoid sinking to her ankles in the mud. Her curious fingers were on everything. When she came to the outhouse, she stopped and looked interested. “Is that a tool shed?” she asked.

Gorilla hurried over. “No, no! It’s the convenience facility.”

The woman wrinkled her nose. “Convenience what?”

Gorilla opened the door and showed the toilet seat and the large peonies. “If you need to pee, Madam.”

The woman’s cheeks turned fiery red. “That is the limit,” she said, turning to the others to see if they’d heard.

Tord, in the meantime, had rummaged among old gramophone records, picked out a cuckoo clock with broken springs, bit into a brass spoon in case it was gold, but not found anything he wanted. He smiled scornfully. “I think we’re done here.”



They went back through the house, and the light-haired man collected his shoes.

“You are welcome to the Council offices tomorrow at twelve o’clock for your results,” said Tord. “Can you keep that time, do you think?”

Gorilla stamped her feet carelessly. “Of course,” she said, smiling. “Twelve o’clock. No problem. We’ll

take the car and might even be there five minutes early.”

The committee jumped into Tord’s car and roared off. On the back window was a round yellow sticker. *A municipality for progress.*

Gorilla watched them go. “Hrm,” she said. “How...how do you think it went?”

“Well,” I said, trying not to sound as if all hope was lost. “It went quite...okay?”

Gorilla chewed at her finger. She put one hand on her hip and looked up at her house with the sharp roofline. Then she looked at me, long and thoughtfully.

In the end she blinked and nodded, as if she’d made a decision. “We shouldn’t expect the worst,” she said. “But I’d like to show you something.”





## Clearing in the woods

“Bring a warm top with you,” said Gorilla. She crawled under the bed and rummaged among the scrap and other things. “I know I’ve seen it here somewhere... I’ll be blowed if... ah, where is it now? A-ha!”

She appeared with a large sausage-shaped cloth bag in her fist. It was bright yellow, and she swung it cheerfully in the air. “Here it is!”

“What?” I said. “What is it?”

Gorilla gave a cunning look. “A tent. I’d thought we’d go on a little excursion.”

The troublesome ache in my stomach turned to a fizz of excitement. “Excursion? Now?”

Gorilla nodded importantly. “Certainly,” she said. “Nothing better than camping at this time of year. You and I need a little relaxation after all the work we’ve put in today.”

Oh, how happy that made me! I’d never been camping in my entire life.

“Do you know where we’re going?” I asked, pulling an enormous, green cardigan from the pantry.

“Absolutely,” said Gorilla, smiling. “I do know. It’s nowhere exotic, but...for me it’s special.”

When she’d packed a bag full of things we needed—the horse blanket, a cushion and a saucepan—we got into the car. Gorilla put her foot on the gas and we burned out of town at full speed. It wasn’t many minutes before we were bumping along winding, narrow gravel roads. Sometimes we passed a red cottage or a barn.

Soon we came to the forest. Gorilla swung off on a road that was even narrower and grassy. Tall dark fir trees loomed on each side. Here and there were birch trees that still had some tired yellow leaves left.

Suddenly the road ended. “We’ll park here,” said Gorilla. “There’s not far to go.”

It was chilly outside, but there was no wind, just a gentle puffing in the tops of the fir trees. Gorilla strode ahead between the trees. She was carrying the bag and the bright yellow sausage. I was puffing to keep up with her. She could somehow push right through all the undergrowth with her strong body, while I had to keep making detours.

After a little while, we were there. Gorilla threw the bags down in a clearing and put her hands on her hips. “Here it is,” she said. There was something distant, almost a little melancholy, in her eyes.

It was a lovely place. A large rock stood proudly in the middle. In the moss were small, scraggly flowers left over from summer.

“I like it here,” said Gorilla sitting down on the ground with her back to the rock. “This is like an armchair you can sit in. The rock has a curve, like a backrest. And it is so quiet.” She drew a deep breath. “Very, very quiet.”

It felt a little strange to have her gone somehow into her own world. I liked it better when she was her usual chatty self. “Shall we put the tent up now?” I asked.

Gorilla smiled. “Sure,” she said, getting up. “I only hope we have enough tent pegs. Things like that seem able to disappear all on their own.”

We got the tent up. It was the same fiery yellow as the bag it came in. Gorilla used sticks when the pegs ran out. I made a bed inside with the horse cover and the pillow, and when I came out again Gorilla had got a fire going.

“I always put wood in that crack when I’m here,” she said, pointing to a broad crack in the rock. “So you have dry wood for the next time.”

“Do you come here often?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Nope. I used to come a lot. But it’s been a while since the last time.”

She was lovely, sitting there in her big trousers. As big as a house, with long broad arms. The flowery dress suited her better with every passing day. She

was the sort who grew more attractive with time, Gorilla.

When the fire had been burning for a while, she brought over a flat stone. Then she dug the saucepan out of the bag. “Shall we go and get water?” she asked.

A little way away was a creek. Its dark water meandered through moss, then hurried on down the sloping ground. Gorilla bent down and scooped up water in the saucepan.

I splashed a little in the creek with my boots. It wasn't very deep. I followed the stream, jumping a couple of times from rock to rock and carrying on. The water dragged at my feet, warbling as it ran over the gravel on the bottom. When I looked up, the forest in front of me seemed more sparse.

Suddenly I thought I heard voices. Calls and laughter.

Gorilla came padding over.

“There are children here,” I said. “Do people live in the forest?”

Gorilla looked at me. I could have sworn she was going to say something, but then she looked doubtful. She shrugged. “Come on,” she mumbled. “I’ve left the fire unguarded for too long.”

She headed for the campsite. I stood there a moment, ears pricked, but the wind came up behind me and the voices could no longer be heard. I ran after her.

It was already dark. Everything felt perfect, as if Gorilla and I were two people in an adventure book with the fire and the starry sky and everything.

When the water had started boiling, Gorilla said: “Are you hungry?”

I caught my breath. “We didn’t bring a picnic! We’re going to starve!”

Gorilla blinked at me and got up from the moss. “Wait here.” She smiled and took the bag with her. “I’ll be right back.” And she crashed off through the fir trees.

I sat close to the fire, counting the minutes. It was eerie being alone in the dark. The trees creaked and snapped. A bird flapped by and the wind grew

stronger. It felt as if I'd been waiting forever. Why didn't she come back? I was almost getting a bit angry when at last there was crashing again and she came hurrying out of the trees.

"Hoo!" she puffed, putting the bag on the ground.

"That took a long time," I said. "What have you been doing?"

"I had to wait till the coast was clear," said Gorilla, wiping the sweat from her forehead. "Have a look."

I peered into the bag. There were potatoes, carrots and turnips, an onion and a parsnip.

"Does all this grow in the forest?" I asked.

"Hee hee." Gorilla looked embarrassed and turned the bag upside down. A couple more things fell out: a jar of pickled beetroot and one of pickled cucumbers. I looked at it all with wide eyes.

"Hrm," said Gorilla. "I happen to know a place where things like this can be found. Shall we cook up something nice?"

After some time, we sat slurping vegetable soup. It was steaming hot and tasted wonderful. Probably



it was so good because we'd cooked it ourselves out in the forest, because it wasn't the first time I'd eaten potatoes and carrots.

"Mmm, that wasn't bad at all," said Gorilla, popping a pickled cucumber in her mouth. Then she looked a



little ashamed. “But it’s not really right to steal food from someone like that.”

I giggled. “We should have a camera,” I said.

Gorilla nodded. “Absolutely. Put it all on record. We’ll do that on the next trip.”

The next trip. Gorilla and I would do hundreds of trips together, maybe even more. A happy thrill ran through me when I thought about it.

But in the same moment, my stomach clenched. Maybe. Maybe we’d go on several trips. Or maybe I’d be sent back to Renfanan. I leaned against her large belly.

“How do you think it will go tomorrow?” I asked.

Gorilla stroked my cheek. She was quiet a moment and looked around.

“I’ve been to this place many times,” she said. “Sitting here in the moss, looking at the treetops. I think it’s a good place to run to, when you want to be somewhere else.”

I looked at her. I didn’t really understand what she meant.

“What I mean,” Gorilla continued, “is that you should remember this place. Whatever happens tomorrow, there’s always somewhere to go. Just as I came here, when I wanted...to get away.”

She swallowed and looked at me intently. “Hrm, I...I want to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

She squirmed and tried to find words. “I...I want to tell you that I...” Then she shook her head. “Ach, it’s nothing special. I just wanted to say that you and I are similar. In many ways.”

She was quiet again. The fire crackled and sparked.

“Why did you adopt me, really?” I asked.

Gorilla looked away. “Well...” she said. “I don’t know...It was a little dull being alone at the scrapyard every day. And it’s not so bad out there. I thought, if it suited me, it might suit someone else as well. As much as Renfanan, in any case.”

She looked shy. “But you weren’t so pleased with it in the beginning, eh? I was even going to take you back to Gerd a couple of times.”

“But why did you pick me?” I asked. “Why didn’t you pick someone else?”

Gorilla smiled. “You stayed,” she said. “All the others ran away, like they always do. But not you. And you had dirty hands. I’ve always had a problem with that myself. I can never remember to wash properly.”

All this talk about Renfanan and Gerd and washing made me go heavy as a stone inside. A deep sigh crept from my throat.

Then Gorilla stroked me on the cheek again. “The best book in the world is *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens,” she said. “Do you know why I think that?”

“No.”

“Because it’s about a poor fellow who comes up against obstacles and trouble. Just like... Well, just like you, he grew up in an orphanage. And everyone wants to make life tough for him. But in the end, it turns out well anyway. So just because things look bad, you should never lose heart.”

She put a crooked, black finger in the air. “Look there,” she said. “Do you know what that is?”

I peered at the big star overhead. “A star,” I said.

“Yep. It’s the Ape Star. Ape Stars are a bit special, they’re bigger than the others. Sometimes they shine dimly, sometimes brightly. And then one day they go out. That one, it’s been blinking over the clearing for as long as I can remember. But at any moment it could go out.”

I shivered. It was strange to hear Gorilla talking so matter-of-factly about sad things. As if it didn’t matter if a star that had been shining for millions of years suddenly collapsed and died.

“Shall we go to bed now?” I said.

Gorilla got up. “Good idea,” she yawned. “The fire’s gone out.”

We went into the tent. It was cold now, but Gorilla was soft and warm, and we pulled the horse cover over us. Then we lay with our heads close together on the pillow, Gorilla’s big one and my small one. In a second or two, I fell asleep.



## The decision

The next day we took the car back to town. Halfway there, Gorilla stopped the car. “Do you want to steer?” she asked.

I stared at her. “Yes,” I said. “Of course!”

“Come on then.” Gorilla patted her leg. “You can sit on my knee.”

I climbed over and sat behind the wheel.

Gorilla accelerated carefully. “Change up!” I cried. “Accelerate and change up! Carry on!”

Gorilla drove faster. I turned the wheel round every little corner, and even managed to avoid the potholes. “Slam on the brakes!” I said. Gorilla pushed the brake pedal. I pushed the horn. TOOOOT!

“You’re a miracle child!” trumpeted Gorilla. “I’ll be blowed if I didn’t get a little genius from over there at Renfanan! Yes, I did!”

I steered the whole way to a big parking lot in the middle of town. Gorilla pulled on the handbrake in front of a brown building.

There were many rows of windows in lines one above the other. They looked like big gaping holes. The whole place was somehow sad and boring, more like a shoebox than a building.

“This is the Council office.” Gorilla sighed and squeezed her way out of the car. I followed her up the steps.

It was dark and gloomy inside. At the end of a long corridor was a brown door and on a metal sign was engraved: *Tord Fjordmark—Council Chair*. Gorilla snorted at the words, then she knocked.

“Come in!” someone called.

We opened the door. There sat Tord, his face pale and dull as an ashtray. The light-haired man and the woman from the inspection were also there. The ship

in a bottle Tord had been given was on a shelf. He had decorated his room in a nautical theme, with shells encircling the bottle. On the wall was a painting of a sailor with a pipe in his mouth.

“On time,” said Tord. “Please be seated.”

There was someone else in the room. She sat with her thin bottom on a chair next to the wall, blinking nervously. It was Gerd from Renfanan.

When we stepped in and sat down, she looked at Gorilla, terrified, as if she expected to be attacked.

Tord fixed his eyes on Gorilla and looked for a long time. She began to squirm, and he enjoyed it. “Right,” he said finally. “It doesn’t look good. When young ones are in trouble, one is forced to intervene.”

Gorilla swallowed. Her eyes were shiny, and her big hands were shaking.

“And following our visit to your home, we of the committee have decided that it is not a suitable environment for a child to grow up in,” said Tord.

“Especially when she comes from such a pleasant environment as Renfanan,” added the woman.

Something exploded inside me. I was so angry I leaped to my feet, tears streaming. “You haven’t even asked me!” I said. “How can you know what is right for me, when you haven’t asked me a single time?!”

No one found anything to say.

“I don’t want to live at Renfanan!” I continued. “I want to stay at the scrapyard, but you’ve just been running around taking notes and deciding for yourselves what I want!”

Tord looked doubtful. “Hrm, since we are adults, we do know a little better—”

“You don’t know her!” I said. “You don’t know anything!”

Everyone fell silent again. The committee members exchanged glances.

After a while Gerd began to smile. “Well, I have never had to admit to a mistake,” she said triumphantly. “When I place a child from Renfanan, I always think of the child’s best interests.”

Gorilla swung her head around and looked so hard at her, Gerd could have fallen off her chair. She



squeaked and pressed back against the wall. Then she didn't say another word.

Gorilla turned to Tord. "Yes," she muttered. "Now we've heard what the girl thinks. And about time. I've been trying to tell you that we're thriving together and want nothing more than to be left alone. As I see it, you can go through someone's house and write notes ad infinitum, if you want to. But notes are just notes. Words from someone's mouth are something completely different."

The woman and the light-haired man stared silently at Gorilla. They glanced at Tord and waited for him to say something.

Tord fished up a throat lozenge from his jacket pocket and popped it into his mouth. When he'd finished chewing, he looked hard at me. "So you say you want to live with Gorilla?"

I nodded. "Yes."

Tord turned to the woman. "Clearly Gorilla has coerced her into saying that."

"I haven't! You're making it up!" shouted Gorilla

and she thumped her fist on the desk. She was so angry the whites of her eyes were showing.

“Making it up?” bawled Tord.

“Yes, you are!” I said.

He tilted his head and looked sad. “I don’t think so,” he said. Then he leaned forward and whispered to me so everyone could hear: “Don’t be afraid. You’ll soon be safe.”

“What? What are you on about?” Gorilla burst out. “What do you mean, safe?”

“Well, we at the Council have had a few phone calls,” said Tord. He opened a drawer and took out a green document folder. “From people who’ve been out buying scrap in the old industrial area.”

“And?” said Gorilla.

“Mm,” said Tord. “They speak of very harsh treatment of a child out there.” He read from the folder: “The gorilla raised her fist and shouted that she would, so help me, flay the girl as punishment because she’d missed out two zeros on the price tag.”

He looked at me sorrowfully. “Poor child,” he said.

“What you must have been through.”

“No—” I began, but Tord interrupted.

“Here is another: ‘Gorilla said she’d throw the child in the woodstove when the mistake regarding the genuine Picasso painting was discovered.’ And one more: ‘the girl would be eating nails for lunch, because she was about to sell a crystal chandelier for seven-fifty’.”

Tord shrugged. “It goes on,” he said. “Complaint after complaint. The girl would be whipped, the girl’s clothes were worn out and dirty, Gorilla said the child was the worst thing she’d got since she bought the secondhand car eighteen years ago, and so on and so forth. In fact, we even received a complaint from one of those cheap eateries in town. One of the customers rang to tell us that a certain gorilla was forcing a child to put her boots on the table and drink brandy.”

Gorilla looked baffled. “Cheap eateries?” she mumbled.

“Yep,” said Tord. “Forty-seven witnesses all up.”

“No,” I said. “It wasn’t for real, we did it to sell . . .”

Gorilla looked at me hopelessly. “No, Jonna,” she whispered. And I understood that it wasn’t so smart to tell the committee how we’d made money by tricking customers out there in the scrapyard. Something told me that Tord was well aware that Gorilla’s outbursts at me hadn’t been real, but to do with business. He wasn’t silly enough not to know that Gorilla had neither a Picasso nor a crystal chandelier for sale in her yard. But neither was he silly enough not to exploit an opportunity when he had the chance.

Gorilla cleared her throat. “I would like a word alone with...with the chair,” she said.

Tord’s face lit up like a Christmas star. He nodded to the woman and the light-haired man. “You can wait in the corridor,” he said.

“Can I go now?” Gerd asked hopefully.

Tord shook his head. “Wait out there till we’re finished,” he said.

“Hmph. Some of us have work to get on with,” muttered Gerd, slinking out with the others.

Gorilla fixed her eyes on Tord. “Well,” she said, “congratulations. You’ll finally get what you want.”

Tord raised his bushy eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play stupid,” Gorilla snapped. “You’ll get my land.”

“Oh, that!” Tord pretended surprise. “Gosh, that’s kind of you.”

“Huh,” said Gorilla. “And you know what I want in exchange.”

“Of course,” said Tord. “Goes without saying.”

“The girl,” said Gorilla.

“Exactly,” said Tord.

Gorilla looked at him expectantly. “So?”

Tord leaned over the desk and steadily met Gorilla’s gaze. “You have my word.”

I can’t explain why, but when he said that, I felt a sharp little stab of fear inside my chest.

Gorilla observed Tord for a few seconds. Then she swallowed and said tightly: “Then that’s what we’ll do.”



Tord pulled out the desk drawer. “I have the papers ready.” He smiled. “Although because of the situation my offer has naturally dropped substantially.”

Gorilla seemed puzzled. “What situation?”

“Your situation,” answered Tord. “Your compromised situation, to be exact. One thousand for the scrapheap. No more.”

Gorilla looked ready to have a new fist-on-the-table outburst, but she controlled herself. With a dark look, she took the pen. In her large, rough hand,

it almost disappeared. She looked at the dotted line on the paper.

And with a quick movement she signed her name.

“Thank you,” Tord chirped, and he handed her some cash out of his top drawer. He made it sound as if he’d bought a bottle of milk. He looked at me. “Will you let the others in?” he said, putting the papers in his briefcase.

I went and opened the door. When the woman, the light-haired man and Gerd put their curious heads in, Tord said shortly: “We’ll be taking the girl to Renfanan.”

Gorilla threw herself out of her chair. “NO! You said I would keep her!”

“That’s what I said, yes,” Tord rapped out. “But unlike you, I know that words from someone’s mouth don’t mean a thing. With all these complaints it would be irresponsible not to take the girl from you.”

I was paralyzed. It suddenly felt as if I was listening to a story that wasn’t about me. Someone else was standing in Tord’s office, someone else in the middle of their life’s worst nightmare. Not me.

Gerd came and took my arm. I pulled away.

“No!” said Gerd. “You’ll come with me, so don’t make it awkward.”

With a bellow, Gorilla hurled herself across the room. Gerd shrieked and pulled me into the corridor. Tord was after her like an arrow, and he quickly shut the door on Gorilla. She slammed into it with a terrible crash.

Tord fished a key from his pocket and locked the door. Gorilla kicked and banged, her roars making the walls shake.

“Don’t let her out for at least half an hour,” Tord told the light-haired man and gave him the key.

Gerd gripped my arm. “Come on! Move it!” She dragged me into the corridor, with Tord following.

“Let me gooooo!” I growled. “Gorilla! Heeeelp!”

I could hear her furious howling all the way to the carpark. Tord pushed me into the back seat of the car and Gerd sat beside me. Then we drove to Renfanan.





## Back at the orphanage

“You’ll have to keep her locked up somewhere, for a time,” said Tord from the driver’s seat. “Gorilla will almost certainly try to take her back.”

Gerd bleated. “Should I have to live with that sort of thing?” she complained. “My life could be in danger!”

“Huh!” said Tord. “It’s not you she wants.”

Gerd squirmed. “Maybe not, but when you’re dealing with desperate—”

“If the girl disappears from Renfanan, you are responsible,” said Tord tersely. “And we in the Council take that sort of thing seriously.”

Gerd swallowed.

“I understand this is unsettling for you.” Tord was looking at me in the rearview mirror. “But we’ll let some time pass and soon you will have forgotten Gorilla. It won’t take long.”

I didn’t answer. There was no point in saying anything. There was no point in doing anything. I pressed my forehead to the cold window. My tears made it go misty. Soon we were out in the country.

“Drive onto the gravel,” said Gerd when we rolled up the road towards Renfanan.

“But it’s so beautifully raked,” protested Tord.

“Yes, yes,” said Gerd. “Gravel is for driving on.”

We rattled in over the gravel and Gerd climbed out like royalty. The front of the house was full of children standing and waiting. I was back at Renfanan, with its white walls, shiny windows and well-combed children. They stared at me with wide eyes.

“Remember what I said!” said Tord through the wound-down window. “Locked in!”

Then his shiny car zoomed away.

“Aaron!” cried Gerd. “Get the rake and make the

gravel nice. And then carry on with the new door!” She pulled me up the stone stairs. Some children ran after us. I knew what they were thinking when they saw my unbrushed hair and filthy jeans. They felt sorry for me. They thought I’d been rescued.

Gerd was angry with the children who followed us. “Get back outside! There’s still a month’s worth of wood chopping to do!” she cried.

When we entered the hall, she became indecisive. “Where shall we put you then?” she complained, looking around. Unwillingly, she had to admit that the only lockable room in the whole building was her own. “Well then!” she said, pushing me into her office and bedroom combined. “You’ll be in here with me. But heaven help you if you snore in the night. In the morning we’ll start cleaning you up.”

She had serious problems with my current state of hygiene.

The rest of the day, Gerd was nervous and on edge, biting her nails and looking at me as if I was the greatest misfortune of her life. That evening, she

crept into her billowing nightgown. She'd fetched a mattress for me from the dormitory above and laid it on the floor. She kept looking out through the window. "What do you think?" she whispered. "Do you think she'll turn up, your... Gorilla, I mean?"

I thought about her, my gorilla. Would she come to get me?

"Yes." I nodded confidently. "She'll come. I know it."

Gerd didn't seem satisfied with my answer. She wrinkled her face so it looked like a pink dishcloth and peered out through the window again. Then she took the telephone from the desk and crawled into bed. "In any case, I'll ring Mr. Fjordmark," she said, and turned out the light.

I wasn't yet in bed and had to grope through the dark. On my way, I tripped over a chair.

"Shush!" hissed Gerd. "Go to sleep!"

Then she began snoring like an entire sawmill.

I hid my face in the pillow. It smelled strongly of washing powder. Newly washed sheets were so coarse and uncomfortable. I hadn't noticed that until

now. My blanket with the gingerbread hearts at the scrapyard was so soft. Gorilla was also soft. Soft and warm...

I hardly knew how it happened, but my pillow was soon completely soaked. She'll come and get me, I thought. I know she will. She'll take the axe from the pantry, then come here and chop down the front door. And Gerd will be so scared she'll hardly be able to move, she'll fall on her knees, crying, and then Gorilla will lift me up and carry me out to the car. I know it. She picked me up from here before, and she'll do it again.

I lay awake for hours, waiting for a noise from outside. Gorilla calling for me, or the front door crashing open. But nothing happened. Towards dawn I managed to fall asleep.

I woke to a knock at the front door. The clock on the wall said it was almost eight. Gerd jumped out of bed and began to pull on her dress. "What now?"

she complained. “Can’t we even sleep through until morning?” Then she started. “Could it be her, do you think?”

I flew up from my mattress. “Yes!” I said. “Yes! She’s come!”

I ran into the hall and rushed to the window. “Gorill—” I said, but then I was silent. I went back to Gerd, who stood there with her knees trembling. “It’s Tord,” I sighed, casting myself onto the mattress.

Gerd brightened. She adjusted her bed-flattened hair and rushed out. They both came straight back to the office.

“If this is to do with being over capacity at Renfanan, I can only offer the Council my apologies,” said Gerd, smiling uncertainly.

Tord shook his head. “No,” he said. “I came to tell you that you don’t have to have the child locked up anymore.”

“Really?” said Gerd.

“Gorilla has gone,” continued Tord with a glance at me. He couldn’t hide a small smile.

Gerd looked as if she'd been given a cone of caramels. "Oh, that's lovely," she chirped, and clapped her hands.

Tord nodded. "It must have been very embarrassing for her, having to let go of the child like that. The car's gone and everything is locked up. She's left town." He turned to me. "So now you can forget the time you had together. And be thankful that everything managed to turn out well."

I stared at him, my eyes smarting and puffy from the night. "You're lying," I said. "She'd never leave without me."

Tord smiled with a look that said, oh, how sweet it is when children don't understand a thing. He came up to me and spoke in a low voice so that Gerd couldn't hear: "I've just come from the scrapyards, to put one of our signs up. A municipality for progress, you know?" He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a folded page, which he gave me. "This was on the door."

TO **JONNA**, it said, in large sprawling letters.

There was no mistaking Gorilla's handwriting.  
I unfolded the paper.

HI LITTLE MITE.  
I HAVE DECIDED TO LEAVE TOWN.  
AM TIRED OF THE WHOLE THING. THERE'S  
ALWAYS SOMEWHERE TO GO.

A bit further down was the signature:

— THE APE STAR

Tord wrinkled his nose. "That's a funny signature she's chosen for herself," he said. "Gorilla has never been a star. Ape brain would fit better."

I couldn't say a word. I read the lines over and over, but it said the same thing every time. It was true. She'd gone.

Tord and Gerd were blurred by the tears in my eyes. Gerd put her head to one side. She looked really sorry. "But little one," she whispered. "Is it really so sad?"

Tord rolled his eyes. "If I could only understand why she's so stuck on that gorilla," he said. "She should be pleased!"





“Children are children.” Gerd smiled.

Tord nodded in agreement.

I couldn’t say anything. Tears ran down my cheeks. I lay on the mattress and hid my face. Gorilla had left me. I’d never have believed it.



## The photo

When Tord had left the office, Gerd came and patted me on the head. “Go out to the others, poppet,” she said. “The bath can wait. Don’t be sad, now.”

I dried my face and pulled on my jeans. I crumpled the note with Gorilla’s handwriting into my pocket. Then I went out to the garden.

The winter chill had chased all the leaves from the trees. In the forest behind the orphanage only the fir and pine trees were not bare. Every child was busy working. In the woodshed some children were chopping kindling for the woodstove. Others were out on the hill splitting logs. A couple were raking, down by the lilac bushes. Others were busy with carpentry.

I kicked my boots in the slippery grass. I felt the note in my pocket. It had become crumpled and damp, and I gripped it even tighter. All the sadness was getting mixed in with anger. I felt tricked in some way. I saw in front of me how Gorilla sat behind the steering wheel, already halfway through the countryside, shrugging off everything that had happened.

“Jonna!” It was Aaron. He stood with a carpenter’s plane, running it over planks that lay on a couple of trestles. “Come here!” he called. The dark-haired brothers were there too. They smirked in their usual provocative way as I came closer.

Aaron was red and sweaty. The freckles on his face were like spots of drizzle. I took my hand out of my pocket and punched him on the shoulder.

“Ow!” he sputtered. “What was that for?”

“For all your lies,” I said. “I didn’t get eaten.”

“Shame,” said one of the small boys, thinking he was hilarious. His brother laughed along.

“Shut up,” said Aaron. “And go away!”

The brothers stared stupidly at him, but they weren't slow to obey. They put down their planes and slouched away, shamefaced, to where some small kids were sorting sticks.

Aaron looked at me. "I was a bit worried about you," he said. "And some of the others were too. Was it terrible over there? With Gorilla?"

"Nah. What are you doing?" I asked because I didn't want to talk about it.

"Fixing a new door for the cellar. There were thieves while you were away, they broke in and stole food. Gerd is hopping mad about it."

Just then a car could be heard coming along the road. The mail. A couple of seconds later Gerd rushed out of the house in her slippers: "Freshly r-aa-aaked! Stoppp!!"

Aaron laughed. "Why doesn't she just move the letterbox? She has to run and shout at that poor guy every day."

Gerd took a large envelope from the driver, who disappeared again. She opened it, and soon made a

lively leap in the air. “Hoo!” she cried, waving a page. “The photo! The photo has arrived!”

There was a storm of jubilation. All the other children dropped what they were doing and ran over. Soon Gerd was surrounded. She held the photo over her head. “No!” she cackled. “No piggy fingers on this! I’ll frame it and put it up in the hall with the others.”

She went up the steps with all the children at her heels.

Aaron put down the plane and shrugged. “Let’s go and see,” he said.

“I don’t want to. You go,” I said.

He tugged my arm. “Come with me. I know you’re always ugly in photos, but don’t worry. You can see how handsome I am instead. Come on!”

He took me down to the big entrance. Inside, the hall was as crowded as a yard full of sheep. Everyone was shouting and trampling on each other’s toes. Gerd came out from the office looking important. She was carrying the framed photo as if it were a gold medal

she was about to bestow on a Nobel prize winner. “Watch out!” she commanded.

She hammered a nail into the wall and hung up the photo. “There!” she said.

Everyone squashed closer to look. “Oh, no!” cried Aaron when he saw the picture. “Rubbish photo! Why did he take it right when my eyes were closed?”

I couldn’t help smiling. Aaron’s eyes were half-closed, with just a little of the whites showing. He looked idiotic.

I looked neat. My ponytail was headache tight. My nails were clean, and my trousers too. I looked happy. It was always fun when the photographer visited, and it felt special to end up in a photo like that. Ceremonious.

“I’ll go out and finish the door,” said Aaron. “Coming?”

I shook my head. “I’ll look for a bit longer,” I said. “I might come.”

Soon I was left alone, looking at the big wall covered in photos. Imagine how many children had

lived here. Lots of small pale faces looked at me from long ago.

My gaze came to a stop. In a row higher up were several photos with something strange to be seen. There was a large collection of children, but there was something else. In a corner a darker figure lurked. A hairy little face...

I couldn't believe it was true! It was Gorilla's face looking at me with her button eyes.

She was in several pictures, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. First as a little black bundle in Gerd's arms. Gerd was young then. She didn't look strict and nervous back then, only kind. And then, year after year, Gorilla got bigger and bigger, hairier, and scarier. And in every picture, she looked more and more sad and hunched. In the last photo it was as if she didn't want to be seen at all. She was crouched, half squatting behind the back row. Gerd's face was harder.

My head was spinning. Gorilla was an old orphan. Why hadn't she said anything?

Gerd came out from the office. “There you are,” she said. “Are you happier now?”

“Gorilla,” I said. “She lived here.”

Gerd didn’t even look bothered. “Obviously,” she muttered. “It’s nothing to go chattering on about.”

“No one said a thing,” I said. “No one said anything about it to me.”

Gerd appeared happier. “Is that right?” she chirped. “Well, well then. No, perhaps she thought it wasn’t a thing to boast about. After all, many people have lived in orphanages. Would you like a bath now?”

She looked at my filthy clothes with pursed lips. “It will be hard to get rid of all those knots in your hair,” she said. “We might have to cut it short. That could be chic, couldn’t it?”

I went out to the steps.

“Jonna!” Gerd complained. “Will you not even answer when you’re spoken to now? No-o, where is the world heading?”





## The Ape Star

It was evening. All the children were getting ready for bed in the large dormitory. I was already curled up between the sheets. Gerd had bathed me and combed my tangles away. It had taken several hours, and my scalp was burning as if I'd had boiling water poured over my head.

It was terribly noisy in the room. Bed springs screeched and made your ears hurt. I remembered Gorilla's words on my first day with her. How she'd taken the springs out of her bed because she couldn't bear the squeaking. That's why, I thought. Because she'd lain in this dormitory listening to all the squeaking for so many years.

I was angry with her. I wanted to forget that she existed, and that I had ever lived with her. But still. Still, I wished she would storm into the dormitory now. With her axe in her hand and the car waiting out on the gravel.

Aaron came in and threw himself onto his bed. He sighed and blew on his palms. “Skinned,” he complained. “I’ve got two bloody clumps for hands.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“The planing,” he said. “I’ve been planing for seven hours. I’ve got thirty-three blisters altogether. See?”

He held up his hands; they didn’t look good. Red and blue and covered in sores. I wrinkled my nose. “What was it you said you’d been working on again?” I asked.

“A door!” cried Aaron. “A stupid door to the stupid cellar! The old one was broken by thieves the other night, and just because I made a hat stand last year that Gerd liked, me and some others had to make a new door! Stupid old hat stand!”

“What did they take?” I said, sitting up. “Those thieves?”

Aaron licked his hands and whimpered. “I don’t know. Yeah, potatoes and some root vegetables. Jars, too. So now Gerd says we won’t have pickled cucumbers for Christmas. And the beetroots went.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Have you lost your ears?” he asked. “Potatoes and pickled cucumbers.”

I felt my heart banging against my ribs. Potatoes and pickled cucumbers. Beetroot. Someone had been in Renfanan’s vegetable cellar and taken food. I dived down to the foot of my bed, where my jeans were hanging. I fished the note out of the pocket.

I HAVE DECIDED TO LEAVE TOWN.  
AM TIRED OF THE WHOLE THING. THERE'S  
ALWAYS SOMEWHERE TO GO.  
— THE APE STAR

I sprang to my feet and ran to the window. Outside, the dark forest brooded. On the lawn, the little

cellar peeked from the ground with its new wooden door. I looked at the sky, where the stars shone like a thousand small white dots. Wasn't one of them blinking a little more than usual? A large, burning point? Wasn't it one of the stars Gorilla had talked about? An Ape Star?

I went back to bed.

"What are you looking at?" Aaron asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Time to go to sleep." I crept between the coarse sheets and turned my back to him. Soon the dormitory lights went out.

How slowly time can go when you want it to go fast! I thought I'd lain there waiting for an eternity when at last I dared get up. Squeaks and murmurs came from all the beds. I crept over to my clothes. When I had everything on, I went to the door.

"Jonna?" I started and turned around. Aaron's freckled face was visible in the gloom. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

"You won't tell?" I whispered back. "Please, don't say anything."

He stared. “Are you going?”

I nodded. “Yes. Maybe. If I’m right about something, then I’m leaving. You’ll say nothing?”

He looked at me for a moment. “No. I won’t say a thing.”

I smiled and began to tiptoe to the door.

“Jonna?” I turned again. “It was boring when you were away,” said Aaron. “I hope you’re wrong now, whatever it is.”

“Okay,” I whispered. Then I opened the door and crept out.

The steps down to the hall creaked. My boots were down there, and my jacket hanging from a hook. Violent snores could be heard from Gerd’s bedroom. I turned the key in the front door and the night chill crept over me, damp and lovely. In my pocket was the note with Gorilla’s terrible handwriting.

It was a message to me that no one else understood, I thought. It had to be.

I went round the big white building of Renfanan. Behind it, the plane was still on the ground. My heart

was beating like a drum as I hurried over the lawn and slipped into the trees. The darkness pressed closer, and I stumbled and slithered as I ventured further into the forest. The fir trees were closer together now. I remembered the voices I'd heard when Gorilla and I had collected water on our camping trip. Children's voices, quite close by.

It has to be true, I thought. Please, let it be true. Sticks cracked under my worn-out boots. Twigs whipped me in the face, a nightingale whistled in the dark, and my breath did too.

“No panic on the *Titanic*,” I whispered to myself. “No panic on the *Titanic*, No panic on the *Titanic*, No panic on the *Titanic*, No...”

Now I could hear it. Water chirping and splashing. The moon appeared from behind a cloud and I saw everything more clearly. It was there at my feet. The stream. I recognized the way it crept down then reappeared in a scraggly bend behind the woodshed down in the garden. I ran on up the hill, turned away from the stream and set off to a place where the trees

were thinner. “Please, make it be true, make it true. Please, please, please . . .”

I stopped at the edge of the little clearing. There was no bright yellow tent there. But in the moss, with her back to the big stone, sat Gorilla.

She wasn’t asleep. When she saw me, she got up on shaky legs. I rushed to her and flew into her enormous arms. “I knew it!” I cried. “I knew you hadn’t gone!”

“Of course you knew!” murmured Gorilla, ruffling my hair. “Ha ha! Did anyone think I’d leave here without taking you with me, eh? No no no! And I knew you’d figure out where I was in the end.” She looked up at the large ape star in the sky and blinked at it, as if to say thank you. “Did you hear about the note I wrote?”

I nodded. “I have it in my pocket. Tord brought it. But why didn’t you say anything?” I couldn’t help pushing her. “Why didn’t you say that this place... that-that-that...that it was here?”

Gorilla put me down. She seemed happy and a little sad at the same time. “I...I was close to it many

times. That's why I wanted to show you this place. But . . ." She looked at me with eyes that were so, so small. "You know I'll never be allowed to have you with me again. The only thing we can do now is to get out of here."

"Yes!" I said. I didn't think we could go soon enough. "Come on!"

"It's just that," Gorilla said in a worried voice, "running away from here with me, it's not a little camping sleepover in the forest. It might be difficult; we might even be hunted by the police. And I thought, if I told you that you could find me here, you might feel compelled to come. But if I left you to figure it out by yourself, you'd find it easier to decide if you wanted to come along or stay at Renfanan."

"Are you stupid?" I said, wrapping myself around her legs. "I don't want to stay here for a second. I want to be with you!"

"There, there." Gorilla patted me on the head.

"But one thing you could have told me at least," I said.



She raised her eyebrows.

“Why couldn’t you tell me that you’d lived at Renfanan? I saw you in the photos.”

Gorilla looked embarrassed. “My years there at Renfanan are nothing to boast about. Gerd never liked me. I was mostly in trouble. To tell the truth, I’ve tried to forget that time.” She ruffled my hair. “Yeah yeah!” she said and tossed her head, as if it were a lot of nonsense. “Now we have other things to think about, you and me.”

She looked at me. “Do you want to leave then?” she said. “You’re sure?”

“Yes! Come now!” I cried, pulling her arm with all my strength. “We have to hurry!”

Gorilla smiled. “You’re right. Now we have to go home and pack.”

We went through the dark forest. Sticks cracked beneath our feet. We were silent. When we’d been going for a bit, Gorilla reached out her fist and took my hand. She pressed it so hard, I almost cried out. She said nothing, she just pressed it.

The car was by the road, exactly where it had been yesterday, when we went home from our camping trip. And just like then, I jumped in and sat in the front seat beside Gorilla. Just like then, the car started with a grumble. There was a lot exactly the same as yesterday. At the same time, almost everything was different.



## Adventyr

Outside the scrapyard was the round yellow sign Tord had put there. *On this site, the municipality is building northern Europe's largest spa.* Gorilla snorted at it and unlocked the door.

In the kitchen the clock showed three. "What do you want to take with you?" she asked.

I shrugged. "My bike. What do you want?"

Gorilla scratched her chin. Her eyes roved over the kitchen table, the bed and the armchair. Then they stopped at the bookshelves.

"The books?" I said. "Over three thousand?"

"Nah," said Gorilla, trying to look indifferent. "It's not possible. We'll have to leave them."

She swallowed and began whistling. I thought a moment. “No,” I said. “It’s possible. If we take the caravan.”

“But we won’t get away for hours!” she said, staring at me. “Not until it’s getting light!”

“There’s time,” I said. “You must take the books with you. But you’ll have to fix the caravan because it has that problem with the wheel.”

Gorilla nodded eagerly. She hurried over to the nail on the door and put on her houndstooth cap. “Can you pack then?” she asked.

“Sure. I stacked all the wheel parts behind the toilet, all sizes.”

She opened the squeaking back door and disappeared. I found as many bags and boxes as I could. Then I packed. I put the biggest books in the biggest boxes. The smallest ones in the thinnest plastic bags. The clock was ticking out in the kitchen. I should have been desperately tired, but I wasn’t. I took small hops between the bags and the bookshelves. We were running away. Together. And we’d never

have anything more to do with Gerd, and never again hear a word about Tord.

At four o'clock, Gorilla came in. "Now then!" she said, throwing her cap on the floor. "I couldn't find the jack. It's a pain to fix a vehicle when you've got the whole contraption resting on your back. But now it's done. I'll help with the packing."

After another couple of hours, the whole house was full of bags and boxes. Last of all, I added the pale brown book by Charles Dickens. *Oliver Twist*.

"Now we hook up the caravan to the car and off we go," said Gorilla.

We hopped into the car. Gorilla started it and began yanking at the gear stick. It squeaked and rasped. "This lever can be awkward!" she muttered. "I can't get it into reverse!"

"I don't think you've got the clutch the whole way down," I said. "You might be a little tired."

Gorilla stared at me. She tried to look cross, as if she thought I was being cheeky, but she couldn't hide that she was pleased I was good at driving. She

pushed the clutch pedal all the way down and got it into reverse.

We attached the caravan in the backyard and parked in front of the big front door. Then we lugged books till our backs ached. Outside, it was getting lighter and lighter. When the last bag was in and my red bike was on the back seat and the porcelain gnome with the broken arm was on the dashboard, Gorilla gave a howl of relief. “Let’s get in,” she said.

But just as she was about to start the car, she stopped and clicked her fingers. “Bother,” she said. “I forgot something.” She looked at me secretively. “I’ve got a surprise. Wait here.”

She swung open the door and disappeared into the house.

I leaned back in the seat. My tiredness began to make itself felt. My mouth went up at the corners when I thought of everything ahead of us. We were going far away to an unknown place. My eyelids had just closed when I heard a car roar in. I opened my eyes and turned around. It felt as if my heart

was pounding in my throat, suffocating me. It was Tord's black car! I saw his stern, hard face through the window, and Gerd was sitting beside him. We'd taken too long. Gerd had discovered that I was missing and sounded the alarm.

“GORILLAAA!” I cried.

Tord came over and ripped open the door. He grabbed my arm and pulled me out as easily as pulling the plug out of the sink. I fell to the ground. At that moment, Gorilla appeared from the house. She had a little black box in her hands, but she tossed that aside and rushed over with a roar.

Tord shoved her. He was not even half the size of Gorilla, but in the wet mud she slipped and fell flat on her back.

Tord straightened his hat. “This is nothing short of kidnapping!” he thundered, furious. “And when I have made a decision, no one will oppose it! I am chair of the Council, for goodness' sake!”

He dragged me over to his car. I tried to find something to grab hold of, but my fingers just slid

through the mud and gravel. It ripped my nails and broke my skin. “Get up!” cried Tord. “Get up and walk!”

Gorilla got to her feet and came after us. “We’re leaving here!” she growled. “Jonna’s coming with me!”

She put her enormous fists around Tord’s throat. “What are you doing?” he wheezed. “You’re suffocating me!” He began to turn bluish in the face.

“Careful!” I said.

She loosened her grip. Tord pulled back his fist and punched her right on the muzzle. She fell backwards, tripped over her baggy pants, spun her arms a few times to get her balance... then fell over anyway. She landed in an unnatural position, with her foot bent, and she roared blue murder. Then she lay without moving.

“Now then,” said Tord. “You’ll be coming with me.” He grabbed my arm.

“No!” I cried. “Let go!”

There was a sudden wham! Tord stood for a couple of seconds staring straight into empty air. He blinked



a little stupidly with his vacant eyes, then fell over in the mud. I stood petrified.

Then I looked at Gorilla. She lay on the ground, grimacing over her foot. In her hand was the long yellow sign, which she'd slammed onto Tord's head. *A municipality for progress.*

Gerd hurried out of the car. "Is he dead?" she whimpered.

"No," I said. "He's breathing."

Gerd shuffled nervously on the spot. "It's true," she said looking from me to Gorilla. "This is outrageous. Kidnapping—"

Gorilla snorted. I leaped over and pulled at her arm. "Help me!" I shouted at Gerd. She looked as if I'd asked her to help me with a fire-spitting dragon, not an injured gorilla.

"I don't know," she squeaked. "That monstrosity—"

"I won't hurt you," said Gorilla. "I promise. Help me this time."

Gerd held back a moment. Then she came over and helped Gorilla up from the ground. She looked at our

big brick house. “Gosh,” she muttered. “So you’ve been here all these years?”

Gorilla stared at her. “You sound surprised,” she mumbled. “As if you’d been wondering.”

“I might have been.” Gerd’s voice was shaking. “Yes, no, I mean just...How nice that things have gone so well for you.”

Gorilla turned to me. “I can’t drive,” she said. “My foot’s kaput. Sprained.”

“You have to!” I said. “We have to leave right now, before he wakes up!” Tord was moving a little.

Gorilla nodded. “Sit in the driver’s seat,” she commanded. “Put a book on the seat and hop in.”

“Me?” I said.

“Should the child drive?” Gerd asked sheepishly. “I had no idea she could.”

I got a little angry when she said that. “Sure.” I nodded coldly then turned to Gorilla, “Jump in.” I fetched a book from the caravan. *All About French Cooking*, it was called. It was very thick. I put it on the driver’s seat.

Gorilla had worked herself into the passenger seat. “And the gadget I threw on the ground,” she said.

I went for the little black box. It was a leather case, with a shiny button.

“What is it?” I asked.

Gorilla blinked. “Camera.” She smiled. “I did say that we’d record our next expedition for perpetuity.”

I ran and jumped into the driver’s seat, which Gorilla had pushed forward as far as it could go.

Gerd bit her bottom lip. “I don’t know...I don’t know that I can allow this to proceed,” she said.

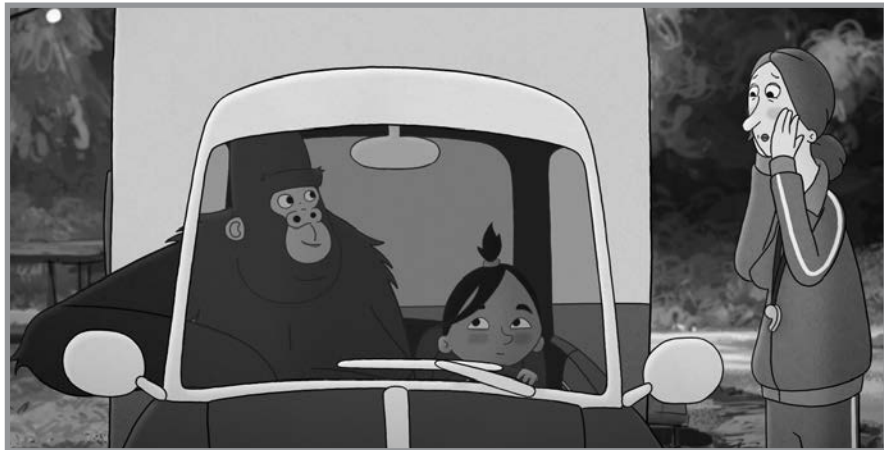
Gorilla put her head out the window. “You can,” she said. “Because you owe me. And you know it.”

Gerd looked at her a long time. “Yes,” she answered. “Maybe I do.” She put a finger in the air. “But I’ll say I was forced to do it! Otherwise, I’ll be in trouble.”

She bent down and smiled. “Goodbye, poppet. And don’t come crying to me if this goes wrong.”

“No,” I said. “Bye.”

We slammed the doors shut. “Can you reach the clutch?” Gorilla asked.



“Yes,” I replied, but I had to really stretch.

“Good. Turn it on.” I turned the key, and the car grumbled to life. “First gear,” Gorilla instructed.

“I know,” I said.

“Release the clutch slowly when you accelerate.”

“I know.”

I released the handbrake...and the car rolled forward. I swung round the yard and went out onto the road.

“I’ll be blowed!” trumpeted Gorilla. “You drive better than me! And with the caravan and all! Haven’t I always said that you’re a miracle child?!”

I went faster. My body thrummed as we passed through the industrial area. “Oh well,” I said, looking one last time at *Pearson’s Garage*. “There’ll be a spa here now, in any case.”

Gorilla smiled roguishly. Her mouth turned up and up at the corners.

“What is it?” I wondered.

“Oh, nothing much,” Gorilla answered. “Just that I never signed his contract.”

“What?” I said. “You did, I saw it!”

“Ha-ha. I scribbled something, of course, but not my name. You know ...” She shook her head and held up her hands. “With these big paws mistakes happen so easily. Everything looks like crow’s feet.”

She turned to me and grinned. “Imagine how thrilled he’ll be when he finds out. It’ll be hard for him to get his hands on that piece of land now. When the owner can’t be found. Hee hee.”

When we’d driven for a bit, I cleared my throat. “Aaron at the orphanage told me something,” I said. “I thought he was making it up, but...he told me that

Gerd got rid of one of the children once. Because she couldn't stand it."

Gorilla nodded. "That's right," she said looking out the window. "I've also heard that story. That child didn't fit with her fine orphanage. She was ugly and too much bother. Someone said that Gerd would chase her out to the woods when people came to look at the children."

"Mm-m," I said. "And one night she put the child on the back of the bike and took her off to some old hut where no one was living."

Gorilla nodded again. "I've heard that. Some old hut on the edge of town. And everyone thought the child died there, of course, because she was probably only...eight, yeah."

"I heard that too," I said. "That she died."

Gorilla stared out the window for a long time. "Yeah," she murmured. "But you never know. Some kids are pretty tough. I like to imagine it turned out well for her in the end."

"Me too," I said.

We were quiet a moment.

“It might be possible to open a secondhand bookshop somewhere,” Gorilla said then.

I nodded. We passed the last bungalows on the outskirts of town. Goodbye, Gerd. Goodbye, Tord. Hello, Adventyr.





Hi Aaron

I'm writing so you won't worry or wonder how I am. I'm doing great, and so is Gorilla. It's warm where we are, Gorilla is always running off to swim in the sea. It must be spring at Kenfanan, is it? I guess you have to work quite a lot, but if you want a bit of peace sometime, I'll tell you what—you know the creek that runs behind the woodshed? If you follow it a little way into the forest, there's a place nearby. It's a clearing. In the middle of it is a rock, as comfy as an armchair.

In the photo I'm sending you, you can see me and Gorilla in front of our Rolling Book Kiosk. Business is going great, we have hardly a spare minute.

Unfortunately, I can't write where we are, in case someone takes the letter to Tord at the Council. But one day we'll meet again, I'm sure. All the best till then.

Regards,

Jonna

P.S. If a gorilla ever turns up in an ugly car, take the chance. Things aren't always what they seem to be.

A note for careful readers: While the word “adventure” is not spelled “adventyr” in English editions of *Oliver Twist*, Swedish translations do use a variant spelling so we have kept this detail in our translation.

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**J**onna lives in an orphanage. Like all the other children, she dreams of being adopted by a well-dressed mother who smells of perfume. One day, a beat-up car pulls up. The door opens and out steps a thick, hairy leg in a muddy boot, followed by a belly as round as a barrel, and finally, a head like an overgrown pear. It's a gorilla!

Surely the orphanage won't let a gorilla adopt a child.

**But, to Jonna's horror,  
Gorilla chooses her...**

